



PUSHIN,

THE

ODDS

#1

PUSHIN' THE ODDS, issue #1: This is an amateur publication and is not intended to infringe upon copyrights held by Spelling-Goldberg or any other person or corporation. This publication is intended for mature audiences and will not knowingly be sold to anyone under 18 years of age; age statement is required for purchase. All material printed herein remains the property solely of the artists involved. Publication copyrighted May, 1983. Purchaser understands that this publication is not to be sold, given or displayed to any minor, nor sold, given, displayed or reproduced for any unsolicited party without express permission of the publisher; statement of compliance required for purchase. Failure to comply with these requirements may be construed as breach of contract, and perpetrators thereof may be liable to lawsuit.



Copy # _____ of 300

18.00

S
to 93

PUSHIN' THE ODDS

A Starsky & Hutch fanzine, for dedicated S&H fans, dedicated to S&H, and fans.
Issue #1, May 1983, by Leslie Fish, PO Box 424, El Cerrito, California, 94530.



Contents



CODE BLUE: a hospital death-watch poem.....	page 3
THE ONLY ONE: between worlds, Starsky meets Terry again.....	" 4
FERRYMAN'S FEE: thoughts on considering the death of a best friend.....	" 8
WAITING: the title says it all.....	" 10
LOSER: after the shooting; Hutch on the edge of giving up.....	" 11
LIKE LAZARUS: for Starsky, walking away from the tomb.....	" 16
ONE MORE TIME OF ALMOST: on getting out alive.....	" 17
DOUBLE DUTCH: Starsky and Hutch meet Cagney and Lacey.....	" 19
SWEET REVENGE QUARTET: matching feelings on escaping the Reaper.....	" 37
ECHOES: back in action, Starsky meets the LA Creeper; part 1 of 3.....	" 39
WALLS: considering how to keep your friend safe when it's impossible..	" 79
JIVE TALKING: telling deep secrets to the bartender.....	" 80
OVER THE LINE: dark revelations hinted to a self-deafened ear.....	" 81
LITTLE BOY BLUE: a simple statement of loving.....	" 93
FALL WITH LUCIFER: sequel to a grim tale in CODE 7 #1; Starsky learns.	" 94
THE BEGINNING OF 'WE': a happier and wiser homecoming.....	" 137
COMING HOME: shortly thereafter, from Starsky's point of view.....	" 140
VELVET FOREVER: a nightmare with a happy ending.....	" 142
FOUNTAIN OF SORROW: another version of the Infamous Brass Bed Story....	" 143
THE WISH: another soliloquy on safety, freedom and happiness.....	" 149
DON'T DO THAT: fun and games in the Torino.....	" 150



Editor's Notes: Sorry this is late, team (does anybody get their zines printed on time?!). I hope the stories, poems and artwork herein are worth the wait. Yes, there will be an issue #2; contributions are hereby solicited. Send those stories in, fellow-fans! Artists are desperately needed! Remember, only contributors get free copies. Save money, and contribute!



Code Blue

Franny Moore-Kyle

CODE BLUE STATION ONE
CODE BLUE STATION ONE

running

"Doctor, there are no vital signs.
We've lost him."

not this one

he hangs on too tight

to let go now.

"How's he doing, Captain?"

"I think you'd better get down here,
Hutch --

Hutch..."

Defibrillator...Paddles...Stand clear...

ZAP

no good

"One more time."

ZAP

no good

"One more time."

ZAP

BEEP

BEEP

BEEP

"He's alive.
Still not out of it,
But I'll be damned
If he isn't alive."



The Only One

by Donna Hutt

Up until a moment ago, there had been nothing. No awareness, no sound, nothing. He hadn't even noticed or cared that it was dark. Before then, he remembered vaguely, he'd been standing next to his car in the parking lot. Talking, even. Then there had been noise. Nothing but noise: a fender being scraped, Hutch yelling, gunshots, impact, a black and red haze that tore everything apart and spun it around him. After that it was quiet, and dark, and...nothing.

...Up until a moment ago. Now it felt like something between napping and falling asleep, being awake with his eyes closed and too tired to talk. And too tired to care. He wanted to go to sleep again. This was noisy, dark and scary. It hurt, too. He hadn't remembered the pain, hadn't felt it again until now. It was making him more awake, the hurt more intense, the darkness more frightening.

Leave me alone. I wanna sleep.

"Sleep, then." It was as if someone had spoken into his ear. "You don't have to die now, Dave."

The voice wasn't familiar at first; it had been years since he'd heard it. Except for his dreams...and nightmares.

Terry's voice...and I'm not dreaming. They won't let me sleep. Terry's voice... Terry?!

A quick flash, like a photo: Terry, standing at the foot of the bed, crying. And one word. "Don't!"

Terry? Don't cry... Don't what? Am I dying now?! Is that it?

And then it wasn't dark anymore. And it didn't hurt.

His eyes were open, and the light was so bright he could hardly see for the glare. He was in a hospital room, sitting on the edge of a hospital bed. Starsky looked out at the large glass window showing the corridor and the other wall. Terry was standing beyond it. As he watched, she lifted a bleak hand and waved feebly.

"Terry?"

The image nodded.

"Omigod..."

"Don't come out here!"

It had been so quick he hadn't noticed it; he was at the door and didn't remember running to it.

"Don't come out here," Terry repeated. "If you come out here, you won't be able to go back in. Stay in there. Go back."

"Go back?"

"Dave, you just died. Turn around."



He did so, looking over his shoulder at Terry once and again. He walked over to the side of the bed, watching a nurse in a red sweater bending over the poor sap lying there. The face on the pillow looked gray. Empty. Familiar.

"Is that...me?"

"Yes."

"I look awful." *I look dead... No!*

Terry was smiling at him when he turned around. "You were badly hurt, Dave. None of them are expecting you to live, do you know that?"

"Aw, Hutch doesn't think I'm gonna die." *No, I can't be really...*

The smile disappeared, and the tears he'd seen before on her face were there as if she'd just shed them. "Oh, he does," she whispered. "He's positive."

Shadows began darting into the room, just blurs of color that began to poke and prod at what appeared to be David Michael Starsky. There was a flurry of activity near the bed, noise, motion, white uniforms. Starsky didn't stop to take much notice, though. The Terry on the other side of the glass was saying things -- like she knew.

"Hutch? He wouldn't--"

She was only inches away. She raised her head and looked at him, her bright eyes boring into his own. "Dave...he expects it. There's so little hope left in him..."

"An' I just kicked off?! Well, isn't that just great! He's gonna hurt so goddam much, and there's nothing I can do about it! Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Terry stood by and waited quietly. Waited for him to finish shouting. "Dave, you can go back," she said softly. "You haven't been dead long... they're still trying to resuscitate you."

"Now wait a minute. I'm dead..." He frowned. "I thought when you died, that was it. What are you tryin' to tell me, Terry?"

She took a step back from the window. "Dave, you're the only one left. You can't die now, not while you have a choice. This is a...special case. You have as much chance of living now as dying. It's up to you. But you have to choose. Now, or it's all over."

The only one left...wha--? "Terry...do you want me to go back?" He was next to the window, silently pleading to her to come closer. "Tell me... please."

Terry looked sad, but a smile appeared from somewhere -- not to brighten her face, but to warm it. "Dave, I'll always be here. The next time, same as now. The same as it's always been. You know."

"I'll always be here if you need me." "I remember." That's the way Terry always was. She was there. She was always there...

But not like Hutch. He's always there, even if I don't need him. Even when he knows better...

"Dave, if you don't go back--"

"Hutch'll be all alone," he finished for her. "There won't be anyone else for him. 'Cept maybe Huggy and Cap'n Dobey..."

Terry just looked at him.

"Terry...when he finds out I'm gone..." He took a deep breath. "When he finds out I'm gone... Aw, shit! He's gonna go out and get himself blown away, that's all!"

"Dave--"

"An' the Cap'n, he ain't gonna do nothin' but yell back when Hutch yells at him. He's not gonna know what to do with him..."

"Dave, please--"

"An' Huggy... Shit, Huggy ain't gonna know what to do when Hutch starts cryin' on him. He won't know--"

"Then go back! It doesn't have to happen this way. Go back!" Terry was yelling, hands flattened against the glass. "Please! Your beloved Captain just called Hutch -- he's driving like a maniac-- He'll kill himself just to get here. Go!"

"Terry--"

"Get out of here!"

He was standing by the bed again. "Alright, alright!" he shouted, then softened his voice. "I know when I'm not wanted. ...Terry, I..."

"I'll be here. You know I will."

He looked down at himself. "You always were."

"Au revoir, my dear."

He took a deep breath and...plunged.

It was dark, noisy again. Doors crashing, tennis shoes skidding on a waxed floor.

Didn't even know I was gone, did ya?


Then the doctor was closing the door behind him, and it was quiet again. Very quiet.

"He's alive. Don't ask me how, but he's alive."


Starsky wished he could laugh at him.

Ha! Helluva lot you know.


















The Ferryman's Fee



Frauny Moore-Kyle



Don't die, Starsk
this is the closest I've been to losing you forever
(except the time they poisoned you)
but if you die
I promise you
I'll get the bastards
somehow



I swear
to any god I ever believed in
to any god that's there
somebody will pay
for taking you away from me.

But getting shot
doesn't fit your idea
of a good time.

I can't do anything here
to make you live
except love you
and I can't help but do that
anywhere I am
whether you live or die.

If you die
the hurt will never go away.
Neither will the love.












Remember the time
you wasted the bums
you thought killed me
(you forgot about the flak vest)

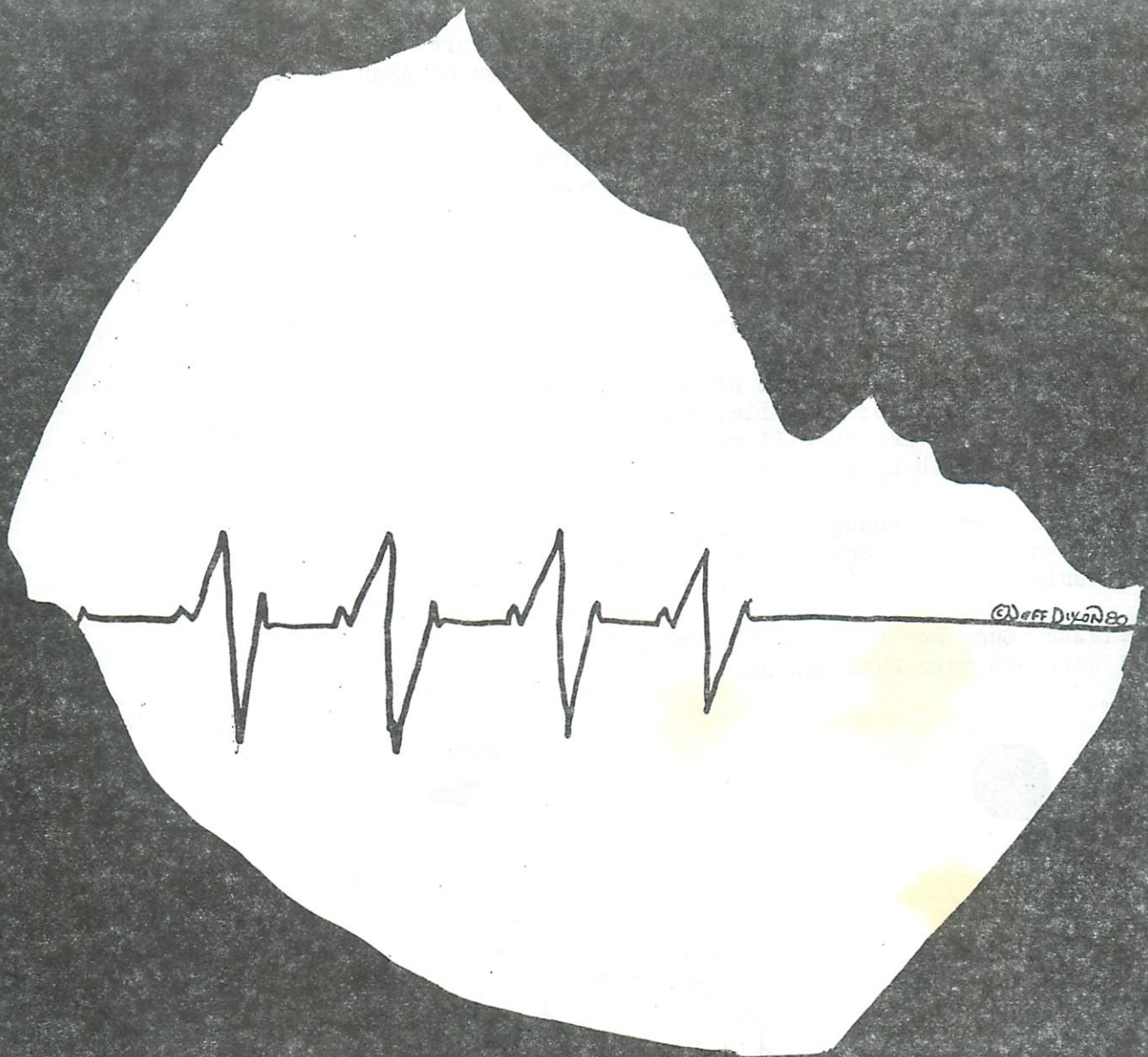
If you said goodbye
and turned your back on me
I'd let you go
because you wanted it.
It's up to you, buddy
-- always has been.

I want to sit here
to see you
to touch you maybe
one last time...

Did it make it hurt less
when you paid my ferryman's fee
even when I wasn't dead?

I only regret
I never called you David.





Long white corridors and sterile rooms.
A place of pain and death
and waiting.

W
a.
i
t
i
n
g

I sit straddling a chair
staring through a window into Intensive Care
watching my best friend's life slipping away
while I wait.

No matter how closely we live with violence
it still, somehow, catches us unaware.
Death reminds us once more
that the love of a friend
is not enough to make us immortal.

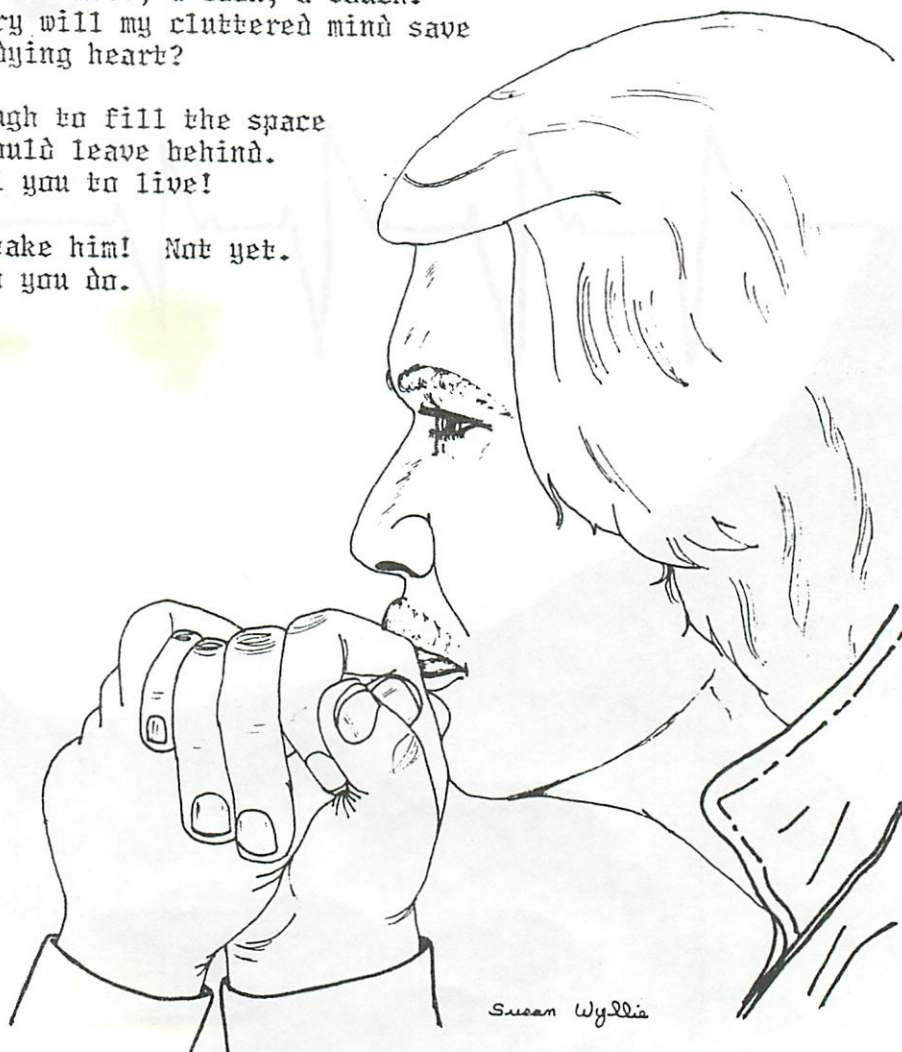
What will I do if I lose you?

There will still be a part of you left inside me --
little things: a smile, a look, a touch.
What embers of memory will my cluttered mind save
to nourish my dying heart?

Memories aren't enough to fill the space
your passing would leave behind.
If only I could will you to live!

Please, God, don't take him! Not yet.
I need him more than you do.

Susan Wyllie



Loser

by Theresa Librande

Hutch tore off the bloody reminders of his partner's shooting: blood-soaked shirt, jeans, socks. He plodded into the bathroom and stared at his reflection. *Streak of blood on the cheek, hands red with the stuff...*

He twisted the hot water on, picked up a hand-brush and began scrubbing the reddish-brown filth from under his fingernails. *Starsky's blood.* He shuddered. *Could I have shouted sooner? And, god, why didn't Starsk drop to the ground like he should have?*

But he knew the answer: Starsky was trying to protect him -- the usual reason one cop got shot in a situation like that. *Protecting me!* Hutch gripped the edge of the sink. He had all he could do to keep from breaking down -- and there were still too many hours before dawn.

The shower was steamy, hot enough to penetrate two layers of skin but not enough to wash out the memory. He leaned against the tile wall, jets of water beating onto his sides and head. The shooting, the following interminable ambulance ride, Starsky's dead-still face, Hutch's own shock dissipating when he was allowed to help, holding the IV: such a little thing, but it had felt good. Touching -- holding Starsky's hand for a minute, the cold fingers curving slightly around his own. The sense of loss and shock returning when Starsky was taken from him and whisked into surgery.

Shaking his head to clear it, he turned the shower off and stepped out of the stall. A growing sense of urgency filled his mind as he entered the bedroom to dress. Rushing into clean clothes, he tried not to think of what he might find back at the hospital. Hutch slipped on his boots, then hesitated, composure crumpling. He sagged onto the bed and leaned his head on his hands. "Oh christ, Starsk," he mumbled.

A horn sounded from outside. Time to get up and leave. Resolutely jerking on his holster and jacket, he stopped to gaze at the empty apartment for several seconds before closing and locking the door behind him.

* * *

It was Wednesday, two days after Gunther's preliminary hearing. It hadn't gone well, didn't feel right. Hutch tapped impatiently on the wall of the elevator and glanced at his watch. He was 15 minutes late for his appointment with the Deputy District Attorney.

The doors slid open and Hutch pushed off the wall and into the corridor. The receptionist let him in immediately. She glanced at him in distaste, taking in the worn jeans, rumpled shirt and overall crummy appearance. He was beyond caring.

"Ah, Hutchinson." Deputy DA Reed looked up from an organized pile of miscellaneous reports and forms, his hand over the speaker of a telephone. "Have a seat and I'll be with you in a moment."

Hutch closed the door, slumped into the chair and shifted nervously. He was itching to get back to Metro, make out reports, review Gunther's case,



12)

Casey
#22

check on Starsky...

"Yes, yes, I'll call back later. Goodbye." Reed hung up the phone and faced Hutchinson, his face carefully cheerful. "I called you here in reference to the Gunther case."

"Yeah, what is it? Set a trial date?"

Reed pushed his glasses up and cleared his throat. "Detective Hutchinson, I'm well aware of the time you've put into this investigation, but due to lack of real evidence Mr. Gunther's charges have been amended."

Hutch's head snapped up, his expression a combination of stunned amazement and outrage. "Amended?" he asked hoarsely.

Reed held up his hand in a halting gesture. "Slow down, hold it -- I know what you're going to say. Look: we barely got this thing bound over. We don't think we can get a conviction." He slowed his voice down, making sure Hutch could understand everything he was saying. "There is no real evidence against Gunther. The only thing we have is circumstantial." He paused, half-angrily shaking his head. "I don't care if you caught Gunther with a smoking gun in his hand; it's still circumstantial."

Hutch didn't say anything.

Reed stood up, turning to face the window, his hands clasped behind his back. "He's going to plead to resisting arrest. He'll be fined and probably get 30 days county, max. As for Bates' murder, the butler confessed and Gunther is testifying against him."

"The butler?!" Hutch exploded. "You're telling me the butler did it -- like in some cheap mystery novel? How long did it take you to dream that one up?"

"Look, Hutchinson, that's the way it is!" Reed was still facing the window. "We either get him copping to Resisting, or we kick him loose today!"

"That's a pile of crap and you know it!"

Reed turned suddenly and slammed his fist on the desk. "She me some hard evidence! Give me something I can take to court!" His voice lowered. "You know the rules as well as I do. So far, all you've got is shit."

Hutch's face was set and angry, only his eyes betraying his real weariness. He'd dug relentlessly for more evidence -- something more binding than the computer printout. To his dismay and overwhelming frustration he'd found that Gunther had covered his tracks well. "I guess Gunther has pals in the judicial system too," he said quietly. "You should know." Hutch pushed himself from the chair, turned and stalked out of the office.

"Get back in here, Hutchinson!" The elevator door closed over Reed's angry shout.

Hutch quietly pounded his fist on the wall. He could care less whose toes he stepped on anymore. *Gunther...he nearly kills Starsky and gets away with it...* And it was his own fault for not finding the evidence he needed.

* * *

Hutch entered the precinct office, paused by the coffee machine and filled

a cup with the steaming brew. He dropped into his chair and stared at the cup he was holding. It was shaking violently, splashing liquid on the white sheets of paper. He unclenched the cup, set it down and stared at the brown-splotched reports. *Shit, all of it. Not worth a damn. Circumstantial...* His hands came up and covered his face, nails digging into the flesh. *Oh christ, I fucked it up -- Starsk was down and I...* Rising screams of frustration and pain reverberated in his head, but none passed his lips. He tightened his grip on himself, cutting off feeling, slipping into a soft black void where no outside sounds could penetrate.

Minnie scooted into the office and plopped a sheaf of folders on Hutch's desk. She frowned in concern. "Hey, Hutch," she said softly, touching his clenched fingers. "You all right?"

There was no response.

The Captain's office door opened and Dobey came out. "Hutchinson, I just heard from Reed at the..." He frowned and leaned on the desk next to Hutch, his palms pressing flat on its surface. "Hutch?"

"He's been like this since I came in, Captain," Minnie said, her hands sliding up to touch Hutch's hair.

Dobey's mouth went dry. *Little food, less sleep...the case being dropped, or all but...and Starsky...* "Call an ambulance," he said abruptly.

* * *

The late afternoon sunlight streamed through the crack between the curtains in Hutch's bedroom. The blankets were twisted every which way around him, pillows clutched tightly in his arms. His eyes creaked open and he groaned softly, flopping onto his back. The digital alarm clock indicated that it was Sunday, 4 o'clock, PM. He stared at the ceiling, his brow furrowing. He recalled something happening at Metro, a doctor, Dobey and Huggy taking him home, putting him to bed...

He pushed himself up, untangling the blankets from his legs. He stood up too quickly, vision blurring, his background headache intensifying sharply. It took a moment to regain his coordination. He pulled a robe on and looked around the divider into the living room. Huggy was sprawled on the couch, the television showing a baseball game, volume turned down. Hutch smiled slightly, knowing Huggy had been there the whole time, like all those other times.

He glanced around, just noticing that the room had been straightened: dirty clothes from the past week gone from the floor, garbage in the can, *Starsky's* jacket hung on the back of a chair... Hutch sat on the edge of the bed, his hands gripping the worn leather coat tightly. He'd taken it from the nurse at the hospital, along with Starsky's watch, shoes -- all the things that distinguished him from every other patient.

"Hey brother, you all right?"

Hutch looked up to meet Huggy's concerned gaze, hands still holding the jacket. "How is he, Hug? Did anything..."

"He's okay, Hutch." Huggy smiled tightly. "He's off the critical list -- stable and improving." His grin broadened. "Dobey says he's talking --



(15

Casey
#82

and the first thing he did was proposition the nurse."

A relieved smile momentarily brightened Hutch's face.

"I've been there," Huggy continued. "A day and a half of worryin' about you." He shook his head, looking mock-disgusted. "You an' your Dyin' Swan act, Hutch." He placed a hand on the man's shoulder, his tone softening. "You gotta be more careful, amigo."

Hutch bowed his head, his expression sobering. "I should've watched my step, Hug. I was in such a damn hurry to find something to nail Gunther with that I didn't notice..." He shook his head and cupped his hands around his eyes. "Damn," he muttered softly. "I let my partner down, Hug."

Huggy sat down across from him, straddling a chair. "The system fucked you, Hutch. Man, you had the evidence. You did a hell of a job." Huggy looked frustrated and bitter. "If I were you, I'd tell them to take their screwed-up system and shove it."

"I... We're quitting, Hug," Hutch announced suddenly. His eyes lifted to meet his friend's. His voice was quietly level. "This time it's for good."

"'We'?" Huggy stared at him. "What if Starsky has different ideas?"

Hutch shifted his gaze toward the closed curtains. He got up and opened them wide, the window framing his shadowy form. He leaned heavily on the sill, head bent.

"I don't know, Huggy," he said finally. "I just don't know. I only know that I've had it. I can't take this anymore."

To himself he added silently: ...And I can't lose him.



Like Lazarus

Pat Massie

*Like some badge of courage or merit, some sign,
You wear them well. Ribboned and recognized,
Like a medallion pinned to a general's chest,
You wear the wounds and the bruises
Of your engagement with death. Proudly.
Like Lazarus, wake from the grave.
Like Lazarus, walk from the tomb
To embrace this new freedom and struggle.
Now to live with life, though scarred.
I know you'll find this temporal condition
One of lasting joy.*



One More Time of 'Almost'



Susan Wyllie

The hospital released you -- finally.

When I came to pick you up
you smiled a warm "Hello"
full of the promise of many tomorrows.

I ache to hug you tight,
to reaffirm your precious existence,
despite your bandages and newly healed wounds;
to tell you how much I need you for my life.
But all my traitor tongue will say is
"Let's go home, buddy."

Gray clouds and smog
blot out the sky as I drive you home.
It doesn't matter.
Your eyes are the only blue I need.

We made it through one more time of "almost", partner.
Once more death has passed by,
brushing the hem of his robe against us.
Yes, us. For if you died, so would I.
But you didn't.
You're still here -- warm and alive
and laughing and loving --
beside me.

We made it through another storm
and now there's sunshine up ahead.
-- for a little while, anyway.
God gave you back to me one more time.
And, after all,
"almost" only counts in throwing horseshoes.



Double Dutch

by Roberta Rogow

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" the tall blond cop asked his partner for the fiftieth time.

"Sure!" The dark and volatile member of the duo balanced precariously on a first-storey window-ledge. "Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"Many times," Hutch muttered, thinking of some of the more hare-brained schemes they'd been involved in over the years. "And playing Spider-Man this soon after getting out of the hospital isn't exactly a brilliant idea."

"I'm back up to par, goddammit!" Starsky seethed. "Better'n before, even! All that Physical Therapy and stuff--"

"And eating a decent diet for a change..." Hutch backed off, remembering. *8 months since the shooting, and he's still anxious about it...how close he came to dying, or being a permanent basket-case... Let be.*

"Blechh! Thank god that's over with. They took me off PT and rabbit-food a month ago, and that means I'm okay." Starsky flashed a defiant grin.

"So we wind up in New York, playing cat-burglar. Terrific."

Starsky inched over to the next window. "Are you still sore about our hopping that plane?"

"We've been out of touch for 5 hours! Dobey's going to--"

"He'll be delighted when we march in with LaCosta in tow." Starsky looked upward, peering through the window.

Hutch looked at the debris that surrounded them. "Are you sure this is the right alley? They all look alike in the dark." And, he added to himself, *We always wind up in them.*

"Look. Every apartment house has an alley, right?"

"Yeah, but--"

"And LaCosta went into this apartment house, right?"

"Yeah, but--"

"And according to the little line-up in the hall, there's an apartment registered to LaCosta in this building, right?"

"If this is the right building," Hutch grouched.

"So all we have to do is get to his window, right?"

"Starsk, I still think we should have wired ahead..."

"SHHH! I'm almost there..."

FREEZE, TURKEYS!!!" Somewhere in the alley a loud voice demanded immediate attention.

"Starsk..." Hutch whispered.

"YA DEAF? COME ON OUTTA THERE!!!" The voice was more insistent, and was punctuated by the ominous snick of a pistol being cocked.



"Uh..." Hutch couldn't think of anything clever to say. Starsky decided he'd just found out what a fly feels like as the swatter descends.

"Okay, get down, and come on out where we can see yez!" a slightly deeper voice commanded from the street-end of the alley.

Hutch sighed and moved his hand towards his jacket pocket. Before he knew what was happening, his arm was gripped in a professionally vise-like grasp and twisted behind his back. He got a close-up view of the soles of Starsky's shoes as the owner of the voice neatly frisked him and confiscated his Police Special.

"I was trying to show you my identification," Hutch said to the wall in front of his nose.

"Oh yeah?" snapped the Bronx-accented voice. "And what about the Human Fly up there? Come on down, and let's see what you look like on the ground."

Starsky gingerly dropped to the pavement. There wasn't much light in the alley, but what there was of it showed two figures in the short-sleeved shirts, slacks and distinctive caps of the NYPD. The taller one shoved Hutch out of the alley and onto Third Street, while the shorter one held a pistol steadily at Starsky's abdomen.

Under the streetlight, the two New York cops were sharply revealed as females: one long-limbed, grim and blonde; one short, feisty and dark. The poetically-minded Hutch thought of a greyhound and a pug-dog. Starsky, more practical, simply thought they were the most unwelcome intruders he had met since his Cousin Milton had caught him playing 'doctor' with the little red-head next door.

"Girls...ah, Ladies?" Starsky began, smiling hopefully.

"It's Officer Cagney and Officer Lacey," the tall blonde snapped, "And I'd be very interested in hearing your explanation for that little acrobatic exhibition you were pulling. Playing you were Philippe Petit? Or are you just a Peeping Tom?"

"That is, before we book yez for attempted burglary," the other cop put in.

"Will you let me get my ID?" Hutch asked softly. Very slowly he reached into his jacket and withdrew his wallet, while Cagney's ice-blue eyes drilled into him and Lacey held the gun steady. He handed the wallet to Cagney. She glanced at its contents, passed it to her partner and shook her head in total disbelief.

"Cops," she said.

"I was tryin' to tell you--" Starsky sputtered.

"L.A.," Lacey said, handing Hutch back his wallet. "Kinda off *your beat*, aint ya?"

"It's a long story," Hutch sighed. "We were tailing a suspect, he got on a plane for New York, and we followed him."

"I don't suppose you bothered with little things like extradition papers," Cagney sniffed.

Starsky looked at Hutch. "There wasn't time," he said, more to answer his partner's accusing stare than hers. "If we'd called in, we'd have missed

him. We nearly lost him in a john-- ah, a men's room..."

"We know what it is," Cagney sneered.

Lacey holstered her pistol. "Okay, guys, tell you what; you check in at the 23rd Precinct -- down the street, turn right at Seventh, two blocks uptown and hang another right. If you get the paperwork done, we'll tag your guy and bring him in."

"But he's up there right now!" Starsky wailed, pointing at the targetted window. "If all this noise hasn't scared him off, that is."

"Anyone we know?" Cagney asked.

"He's from L.A.," said Hutch. "Name's LaCosta."

Cagney shook her head. "I'll ask Charley if he knows him; Charley knows everyone south of Fourteenth."

"There's a LaCosta Art Supplies on Sixth Avenue," Lacey said helpfully.

"The only art this creep does is repainting cars," Starsky replied. "We think he's tied up with an auto-theft ring. They pick up cars on the coast and send them all over the country."

Cagney smiled at Hutch. The effect was electric; her square-jawed face suddenly became attractive, lit from within. "Get over to Captain Rinaldi at the 23rd, and get the papers. See ya!"

Hutch watched as the two women swung back into action and strolled off down the street, his eyes on Officer Cagney's well-proportioned rear.

Starsky wasn't impressed. "Damn! Those two idiot broads nearly ran us in!" he swore.

"They were right," Hutch told him. "We'd better call in before Dobey gets the FBI out looking for us. And let's hope he can get some grease under the wheels here, before LaCosta does another job and takes another trip."

"You go make the call. I'll watch the window."

"I don't think that's neccesary, Starsk. Besides, I don't fancy traipsing through this town alone at this time of night. You come too."

"Whaddaye mean, not neccesary?! He could blow--"

"Look again." Hutch pointed at the darkened window. "He went in, turned the lights on for awhile, then turned them off and didn't come out again. Look at your watch, too. I'll lay you even money LaCosta's peacefully asleep right now. He isn't going anywhere."

"Maybe the racket with those- those, uh, Officers woke 'im up..."

"Then why's his light still out?" Hutch took Starsky's elbow and tugged impatiently. "We can stroll past the front door and see if he's running out of it, but I think he'll stay put until morning. C'mon, little buddy. Let's go make the call and get legal."

* * *

The two out-of-towners headed, grumbling, for the lights of Seventh Avenue. All of Greenwich Village seemed to be out and about in the late-summer heat of early September. Humanity seethed around them: young people in

scantily-dressed twosomes and not always of the opposite sexes, old people shuffling along carrying bundles and shopping-bags, middle-aged people striding purposefully down the street as if it were noon instead of midnight, shrill children zipping through the crowd on roller-skates and bicycles and skateboards.

Hutch stopped in the middle of the crowd and waved his arms in despair. "Look at this!" he declaimed. "How can anybody live like this? Like ants in an ant-heap! It's disgusting!"

"Right on, brother!" cheered a shaggy-haired character in a blue tank-top and green cut-off shorts. Everybody else ignored him.

Starsky took a deep, soulful breath of the soggy effluvium that passed for New York air. "I miss this, Hutch."

"Considering that you left it when you were 10, I don't see how," Hutch sneered. "Let's go find a phone and call in before Dobey has a heart attack."

The first phone they found was, to Starsky's delight, in the middle of a block full of all-night restaurants.

The connection to Los Angeles was scratchy, but Captain Dobey's bellow could be heard clearly through the static. "You're WHERE???" he roared.

"I said, we're in New York. We followed LaCosta on the plane," Starsky explained for the third time that night.

"On whose expense account?" Dobey raged.

"Cap, I thought you'd be pleased! He's gonna have to get in touch with the big boys who're running the operation."

"I want you back here tomorrow!"

"Cap, just get us the extradition papers," Starsky pleaded.

"And send them where?"

Hutch waved toward the yellow-and-green lights on the decrepit building just visible down the street.

Starsky barked into the phone: "23rd Precinct, Captain Rinaldi. Or Officers Cagney and Lacey. They're our New York contacts. And we'll get back to you later!" He hung up the phone on Dobey's inarticulate wrath.

Hutch smiled mirthlessly. "Nothing like a little interdepartmental co-operation," he said. "May I suggest we find some food and a place to park for the night? My stomach is still running on Coast time."

Starsky looked at the smorgasbord set out before them. "Take your choice. Chinese? Italian? Kosher? Indonesian? Or the All-American Hot Dog?"

"It's bad enough we have to breathe here; we don't have to poison our insides any more than necessary," Hutch pronounced, leading the way to The Nature Hut -- a small sidewalk cafe with a large blackboard in front which proclaimed that the "plat du jour" was Avocado Surprise.

Starsky balked. "You come all the way to New York to eat California avocados?"

"Avocados are good for you," Hutch insisted, sitting at one of the small tables. "They're loaded with potassium, calcium and Vitamin C. And," he added as Starsky opened his mouth to protest, "The Diners' Club card is in my

name."

The waiter, a pasty-faced youth in a soiled white shirt and string tie, took their order as if it were their obituary.

"Why do the people in health-food places look as if they have one foot in the grave?" Starsky complained.

Hutch tasted the water and grimaced. "Where do we go from here?" he asked rhetorically. "We can't snag LaCosta until the warrants come through, and we don't know his contacts."

"We start asking questions," said Starsky. "I bet if we'd gone to a pizzeria place they'd know LaCosta."

"Ask who? All our snitches are back in L.A.," Hutch reminded him. "And we'd better check in with Captain whatsisname..."

"Rinaldi," Starsky said. His mind was still on the fugitive. "Hutch, he let himself in with a key, right? So something was set up for him, right? So--"

"So there's a New York connection. This we knew," Hutch finished for him. "Starsk, I think we've been had."

"Uh-uh! I gotta feeling about this one..."

"Avocado Surprise." The waiter dumped two plates of food in front of them.

Starsky poked at it apprehensively. "What's the surprise? For that matter, where's the avocado?"

"Eat it. It's not bad." Hutch dug in enthusiastically.

"I don't eat anything that looks alive." Starsky took a tentative bite. "What's in this, anyway? Eye of newt?" He held an unidentifiable something on his fork, dripping mayonnaise.

"Something wrong, mister?" The waiter was back, but he was not alone. Behind him stood a woman built along the lines of a Sumo wrestler, draped in several hundred yards of muu-muu, adorned with glass beads.

"You gotta beef?" The woman glowered at Starsky.

"If I had beef there'd be no problem," Starsky said nastily. "We're paying through the nose for this..."

"Starsk," Hutch said wearily.

"...And if this is an avocado..."

Hutch wished he could disappear or retroactively disown his partner. The avocado had seen better days, but they weren't at home, they couldn't roust these people, and the woman was bigger than both of them.

That didn't stop Starsky. "Maybe you can kid the other New Yorkers with this stuff, but I come from where they grow avocados. I know what a fresh avocado is supposed to look like. A fresh avocado is bright green, and it doesn't turn into guacamole by itself."

"Mister," the enormous proprietress rumbled as ominously as Muana Loa, "Our avocados are flown in fresh every day from California."

"Lady, I just flew in from California, and this monster-mash sure wasn't on the plane with me!"

The altercation had drawn the attention of a passing crowd, and two uniformed cops came pushing through the multitudes. Hutch took one look and realized that his cup of humiliation had just run over.

"These characters giving you trouble, Gert?" asked the tall blonde. It was Officer Cagney, all right. Again.

"Nah, just a couple of out-of-towners," Gert said.

"It figures," Lacey sighed. "Hey, you two: Starsky and Hutchinson. Pay up and come with us. Captain Rinaldi wants to meet ya. Seems you two just gave our names as your New York contacts."

Not for the first time, Hutch wondered if he could plead Justifiable Homicide for strangling his partner.

"And we're supposed to be plain old cops," Cagney said with a trace of bitterness, as Hutch shuffled credit cards and Starsky sneered at the defeated Avocado Surprise.

* * *

Captain Rinaldi was large, Italian and explosive. He was not particularly happy to see the two visitors from the City of the Angels. "I just got off the phone with your Captain Dobey," he growled at them. "What's all this about a stolen-car operation -- and why didn't you call us in on it?"

Hutch looked accusingly at Starsky. One more time Starsky went into his spiel. It sounded even less convincing the fourth time around. "...And we were trying to locate the suspect when these two ladies--"

"Officers Cagney and Lacey," Hutch put in.

"...Found us," Starsky finished lamely.

"And what are we supposed to do?" Rinaldi bellowed. "Pick up this Tony LaCosta on suspicion of flying from Los Angeles to New York? You gotta have more to go on than that!"

"I gave Charley a call," Cagney cut in. "According to him, there were a couple of LaCostas mixed up with grand-theft-auto about 10 years ago. Punks, he said, from Chicago. They got picked up, and the word was they were sent to 'Nam. One came back, one didn't. End of story."

Hutch stared at her, eyes widening with appreciation.

Rinaldi's frown eased a millimeter. "I respect your father, Cagney. If he says there was a connection..."

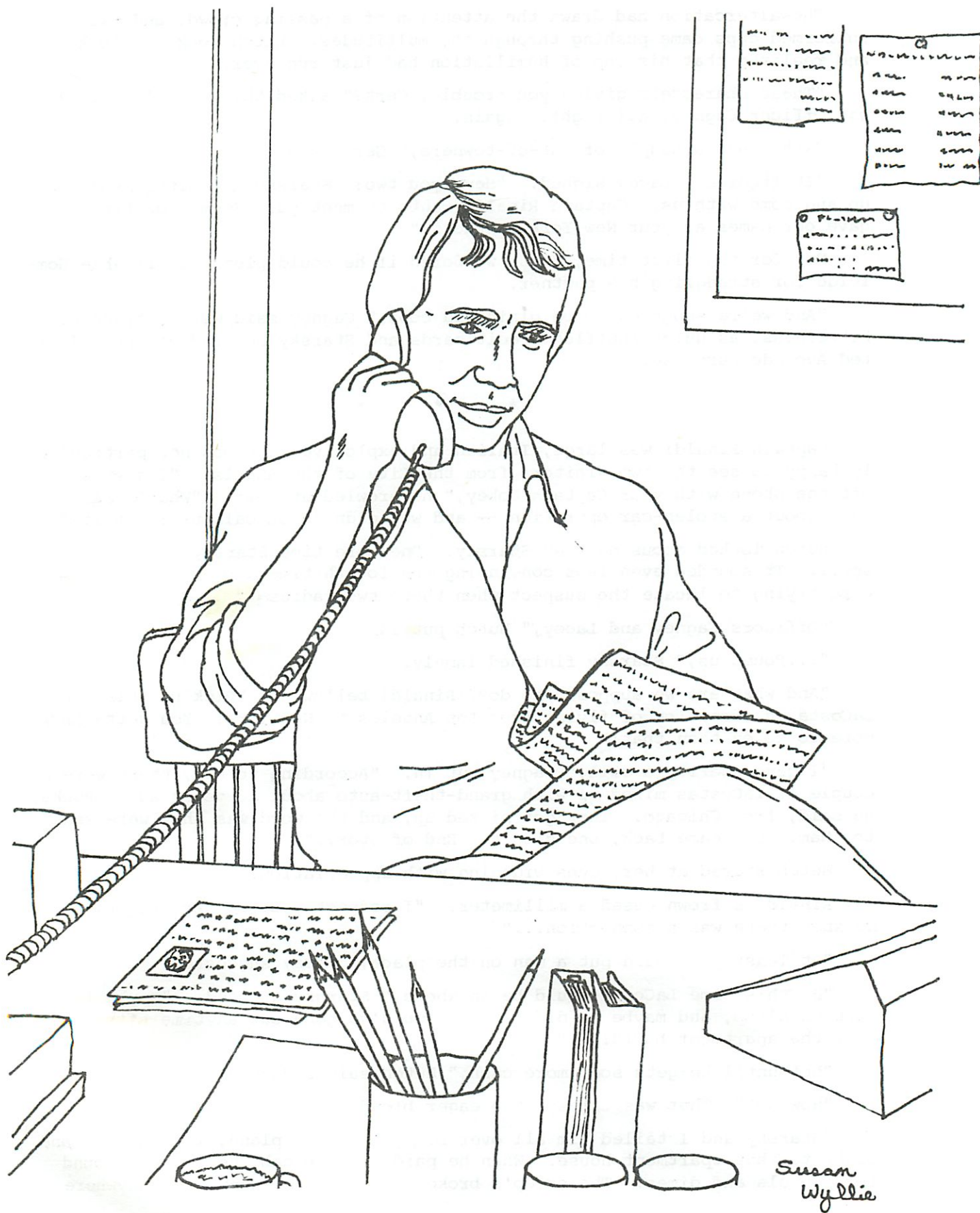
"At least you could put a man on the place," Lacey suggested.

"By this time LaCosta could be anywhere," Starsky grouched. "Maybe he went to sleep, and maybe he didn't. He could've gone out anytime after we left the apartment building."

"Not until he gets some more cash," Hutch said suddenly.

"How so?" That was Cagney, the eager blonde.

"Starsky and I tailed him all over L.A., onto the plane, into a cab, and right to that apartment house. When he paid off the cab, he fished around for nickels and dimes. The creep's broke, and he's not gonna get anywhere



tonight unless the money comes to him...and we don't think that can happen right away, either, because he didn't call anyone from the airport, and we didn't hear anyone on the first floor of that apartment make any phonecalls."

"He could have set it up beforehand," Lacey objected.

"No way." Starsky was grimly certain. "We've had our eye on this bird for weeks, and he hasn't made a move that we didn't see. He didn't call anyone, he didn't get any long-distance calls, and the only mail he got was postcards and junk-mail. My guess now is he'll have to wait 'til morning, then walk to his meet for more dough."

"So we put a stakeout on the place," Rinaldi scoffed. "Then what?"

"Don't bother." Cagney smiled that dazzling smile. "Charley's watching it. He says it's been 10 years, but he remembers the LaCosta kids like it was yesterday."

Rinaldi looked baffled. "One of these days, Cagney, your father will learn the meaning of the word 'retired'! In the meantime, have you boys got a place to bed down for the night?"

The silence stretched long.

Starsky shrugged. Hutch managed a grin. "I guess there are enough hotels in New York..." he began.

Cagney and Lacey had been having their own brief conference in a corner of the squadroom. "Uh, you could come over to my place." That was Lacey, the short dark one. "We go off at one, and Harvey's still up."

"Harvey?" Starsky's eyebrows rose.

"My husband..." Lacey was already on the phone. "Hey, Harve? We got room for a coupla guests? ...Nah, grown-ups this time. Out-of-town cops, stranded. Yeah. ...Look, I didn't want you to get the wrong idea! And hey, have we got anything in the house? I can pick up deli... Gee, that's be great! Thanks, Harve. See ya!"

Cagney and Hutch were smiling into each others' eyes when Lacey turned back to the visitors. "Harvey's picking up deli," she announced.

"Mary-Beth, that apartment of yours is awfully small," Cagney said slowly, "And the kids have school tomorrow..."

"Oh, that's no problem," Lacey said brightly. Then she took in the vibes being projected by the two blond cops. "Oh. Yes. Well...it is a small apartment..."

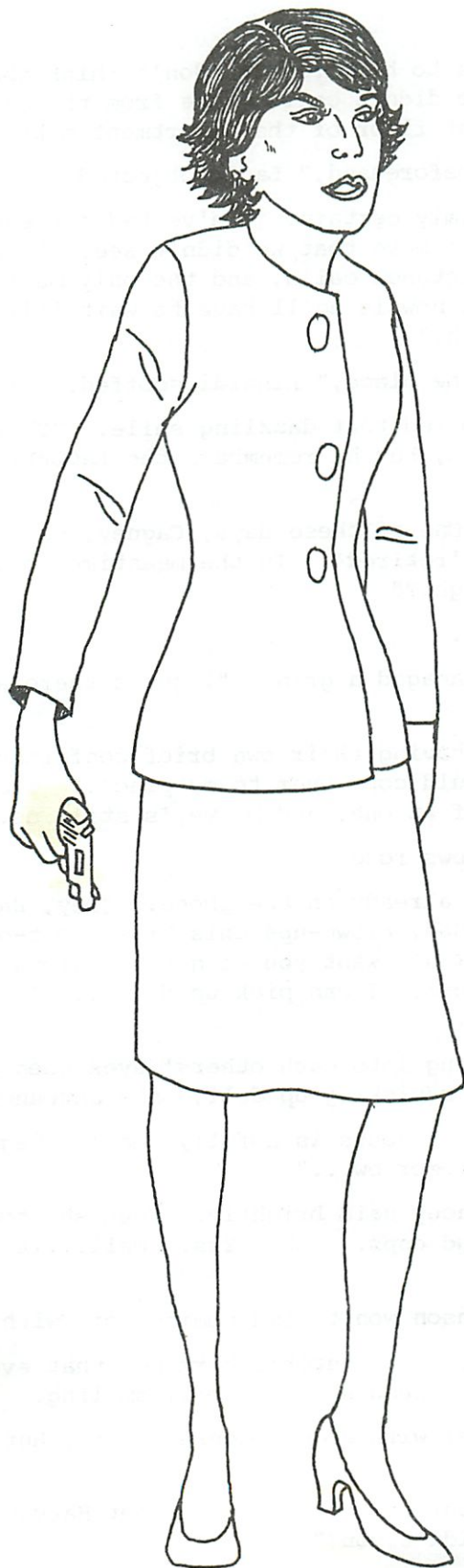
"Detective-Sergeant Hutchinson won't mind coming home with me, will you?"

That electric smile did things to Hutch's hormones that even offset his New York paranoia. He shook his head slowly, still smiling.

Starsky regarded his partner with some concern. "Hey, Hutch, you sure? I mean..."

"Luck of the draw," Hutch purred. "You get to meet Harvey and eat deli. You did say you were hungry, didn't you?"

Starsky realized that there were some times when a partner had to go it alone. "Have a good time," he said, grinning.



Susan Wyllie '82

So they all piled into Lacey's car, and dropped Hutch and Cagney off in front of the run-down brownstone in the mid-70s.

* * *

Mary-Beth Lacey drove to a battered-but-unbowed apartment in the Washington Heights section, north of Harlem, in the shadow of the George Washington Bridge. "Hey, Harve? Campany!" she yelled, as she led the way to a ground-floor apartment.

Harvey turned out to be a stocky, almost-fat, 40-ish man in T-shirt and chinos. "Hya, honey," he greeted his wife. "I just got back from the deli." He turned to the guest. "I hope you like pastrami."

"Are you kidding?" Starsky's eyes gleamed at the rich spread before him: salami, pastrami, sliced tongue, roast beef, rye bread, sour pickles, mustard ... "I haven't had decent cold cuts since I left New York!"

"When was that?" Harvey indicated a seat at the kitchen table.

"Awhile back," Starsky admitted, pulling out the vintage chair, "When I was a kid, but I still remember the taste. Y'know, you can get deli in L.A., but it somehow doesn't taste the same."

"It's the atmosphere," Harvey said knowingly.

Starsky joyously piled up a classic Dagwood sandwich. "I remember once, when I was in camp, I was the Champion Hot Dog Eater. My partner, Hutch, he says I'm poisoning myself. He can eat his avocados; gimme a good hot dog any time." He took a huge bite. A look of pure ecstasy spread over his face.

"Champion Eater, huh?" Harvey grinned at the lean cop.

"I once ate 37½ hot dogs," Starsky said through the pastrami. "It was up in camp, and they put me against some fat kid from another camp..."

Harvey stared at his dinner guest. "What did you say your name was?"

"Starsky. Dave Starsky." *Munch*

"And you were in Camp Gitchee-Goumie?"

Recognition dawned. "Fat Harvey? From Camp Mohawk?!"

Mary-Beth Lacey guffawed. "I guess it's a small world, isn't it?"

Starsky shook his head. "I don't believe it. Fat Harvey from Camp Mohawk!"

"You took away my title," Harvey said. "You beat me by half a hot dog!"

Starsky swallowed a mouthful of sandwich and asked, "So what do you do now -- when you're not eating hot dogs?"

Harvey shifted uneasily in his chair. "Well...I used to work in construction, but then I got this inner-ear thing. So now I'm the super here. We get the apartment for free, and there's the salary, and with what Mary-Beth makes, we get by. Anyway, with me home, the kids can have a place to be after school and I can take care of Mary-Beth's stray cats."

"Like me," Starsky said with a grin. To himself he thought: *I hope Hutch is having as good a time as I am.*

* * *

Hutch poked around his hostess' tiny apartment while she rummaged in her equally-tiny refrigerator.

"I'm not much of a cook," she confessed, "So I don't keep much in the house. And I know this isn't much of a place. I just use it to eat and sleep and change clothes. My life is out there." She waved toward the street, whose noises filtered in over the hum of the fan.

Hutch picked up a photo in a cheap metal frame. A stern-looking middle-aged man in the NYPD uniform stared back at him. "Charley?" he asked.

"Yeah. My father. He always wanted a son to follow him onto the Force. Instead, he got me -- 'Officer Daughter'." Chris Cagney emerged from the corner that served as a kitchen with a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"Not much of a supper," Hutch observed, grinning.

Chris smiled back. "I told you, I don't cook."

There was a long, meaningful silence as the two sized each other up like adversaries before a fight. Hutch saw a tall strong-faced woman in her mid-30s, with a humorous mouth and very blue eyes: no-nonsense manners, Irish as Paddy's Pig, New York to the core. Chris saw a man about her own height, slightly heavier, with fair silky hair starting to thin at the edges and haunted blue eyes: sun-bronzed, street-tough, pure California.

A siren in the near distance broke the spell. Chris started to reach for her pistol, still strapped to her belt. Hutch grabbed for his, tucked under his armpit. They stopped in mid-grab, stared at each other, and started to laugh.

"I guess we're two of a kind," Chris said. "Cops. Charley used to say they were born, not made."

"That doesn't figure," Hutch replied. "My folks were from Minnesota, and there wasn't a cop in the lot."

"Vikings, huh?"

"You bet. Farmers, preachers, and a few oddballs like me."

"I hope you're not one of those classy types who knows about wine," Chris said, reaching for the bottle. "I just keep this stuff around for emergencies."

"Like me?" Hutch asked.

Chris stopped pouring for a minute. "Look, don't get the wrong idea. I'm not like Mary-Beth, I couldn't tie myself down that long, but I'm not exactly Miss Round-Heels either."

"I didn't think you were." Hutch tasted the wine. "Not bad."

"New York Taylor Chablis," Chris said. "Shlainté!"

"Skool!"

They looked at each other over the wine-glasses. There was another of those uncomfortable pauses. This time it was Hutch who broke the silence: "Uh, where am I supposed to..." He looked around. There didn't seem to be much furniture in the place: a narrow couch, an ottoman, a table with two chairs. Through the open door he could see a bedroom.

"The ottoman folds out," Chris said quietly, "If you want it that way."

"You asked me up," Hutch reminded her.

Chris frowned. "This is stupid," she said. "Look, what's your first name? I mean, we can't call each other Detective-Sergeant Hutchinson and Officer Cagney all night."

"Most people call me Hutch."

"You can do better than that."

"My first name's Ken..."

She smiled that smile that lit up her whole face. "Christine Cagney -- call me Chris."

"Pleased to meet you, Chris."

"Likewise, Ken."

After that there was suddenly no more need for words. Actions were far more important. Chris Cagney's bed was much more comfortable than the pull-out ottoman would have been.

The last coherent thought Hutch had was: *I wonder how Starsky's making out...*

* * *

Starsky and Harvey were deep into one of those 'do-you-remember' conversations when Starsky grew aware of two pairs of dark eyes burning into the back of his head. He turned to see two small boys regarding him with detached interest.

"Hey, you kids: go to bed!" Mary-Beth yelled, not too loudly.

"Are you a cop or a crook?" the older boy asked.

"I'm a good guy," Starsky said, very seriously.

"He's from Los Angeles," Mary-Beth told her children. "He's had a long trip, and he's tired."

"Isn't that where movie stars come from?" The older boy was just as dogged as his mother.

"Yeah, a few."

"Do you know any movie stars?"

Harvey, returning with his arms full of bedding, shooed the kids away. "Get back to bed! Mr. Starsky's a cop, like your mother. Where would a cop get to meet movie stars?"

"I worked crowd-control on a movie once," Mary-Beth said dreamily. "Dennis Weaver gave me his autograph."

"Actually," Starsky admitted sheepishly, "I was in a movie. As a stunt man. Hutch and I were working undercover..."

"All Chris and I ever get to do is pound the pavement and maybe work the John Detail," Mary-Beth griped. "She's the one who wants to get us into plain-clothes. As soon as the promotions exams come up..."

"It's not always such a hot deal," Starsky warned her. "They give you 5 bucks and they take 10 back. And the work gets dirtier."

Mary-Beth sat down on the nearest chair. "It's not just the money -- although we could use that, too. Chris wants to be the first woman to make Captain. And she'll do it."

"If you two are going to talk 'cop', I'm going to bed," Harvey stated. "Mary-Beth, you still got the day shift tomorrow -- and you kids: get ta bed!"

"He's right," Lacey smiled apologetically. "We can't talk shop all night." She got up, handed Starsky a pajama set, and trailed after her husband.

Starsky, lost in Harvey's pajamas, settled down on the lumpy couch. His last conscious thought was: *I wonder how Hutch made out...*

* * *

Morning at the Laceys' was hectic, with Mary-Beth making lunches for the kids, Harvey answering complaints from the tenants, and everyone crowding the bathroom. In the middle of the hubbub, the telephone rang.

"It's Chris," Mary-Beth announced. "Yeah... Okay. Tell Charley thanks, and we'll be right on it."

"LaCosta's moving?" Starsky asked eagerly.

"According to Charley, he's looking out the 2nd-floor window in the front. Same face, 10 years older. Charley never forgets a face, especially one he's run in. Harve, get the kids to school, will ya? Starsky, let's move! We'll pick up Chris and your partner on the way."

* * *

Hutch and Cagney were heavy-eyed but ready for action when the foursome reached Third Street. Charley, the aging image of the man in Chris Cagney's photograph, was waiting for them.

"What've we got?" Starsky asked, glancing at the building.

"It's LaCosta all right," said the aged cop, "But I couldn't say if it was Vinnie or Tony from this distance, and through the screens."

"Charley, I owe you one," Cagney said fondly.

"Make a good collar; that's all I ask," was her father's gruff reply.

Starsky wordlessly raised his eyebrows at his partner. Hutch grinned back. Lacey made a cynical face.

"Watch it!" Cagney hissed. "Here he comes!"

A thin, long-nosed man emerged from the building, nattily clad in white summer trousers, blue blazer, pink shirt and white ascot instead of a tie. He passed the four cops in the alley without a backward look, and set out for Seventh Avenue. Starsky and Hutch strolled behind him.

Within two blocks, LaCosta knew he was being followed. He quickened his pace. The Californians did the same. It became a kind of race: up Seventh Avenue, around Sheridan Square, across town on Bleeker Street -- where the

chase ended. Cagney and Lacey had cut across the maze of alleys and were waiting in front of the subway station to catch the fleeing LaCosta as he tried to duck into it.

"I don't know what all this is about," LaCosta whined as they marched him into the squadroom at the 23rd Precinct.

"Why'd you run?" Lacey asked sweetly.

"Wouldn't you, with those two goons after you?" LaCosta glared at Starsky and Hutch.

"Look carefully, LaCosta." Hutch faced him. "You mean you never saw us before?"

The dapper little man stared at the two. "I never saw you before in my life, and I don't want to look at you now."

Captain Rinaldi was on the telephone. "Hey, you two! Hutchinson and Starsky? I've got your Captain on the line, and he's not happy with you. It seems you've got the wrong guy."

"Like hell we do," Starsky muttered. He took the receiver from Rinaldi. "Captain..."

"What have you two morons done now?" Dobey's displeasure was audible clear across the room.

"We've got LaCosta!" Starsky said.

"Hell, so have we!"

Starsky looked blank. "That's impossible, Captain. He's sitting right here in front of us. I've been following this creep around for a month, and I know what he looks like."

"Take another look. LaCosta's been identified right here. Get on the next plane and come home!"

"Captain..." Starsky looked at his prisoner. The man looked smug, as if he'd put something over on someone. "Hold the line a minute."

"This call is costing us..." Dobey fussed.

Starsky beckoned Hutch over to the phone. "I don't like the look of this creep," he whispered. "There's something going on."

Lacey had rolled a long form into an ancient typewriter and was preparing the usual arrest sheet. "Name?" she asked.

"Vincent LaCosta." The little man was practically smirking.

"Vinnie?" Cagney asked sharply.

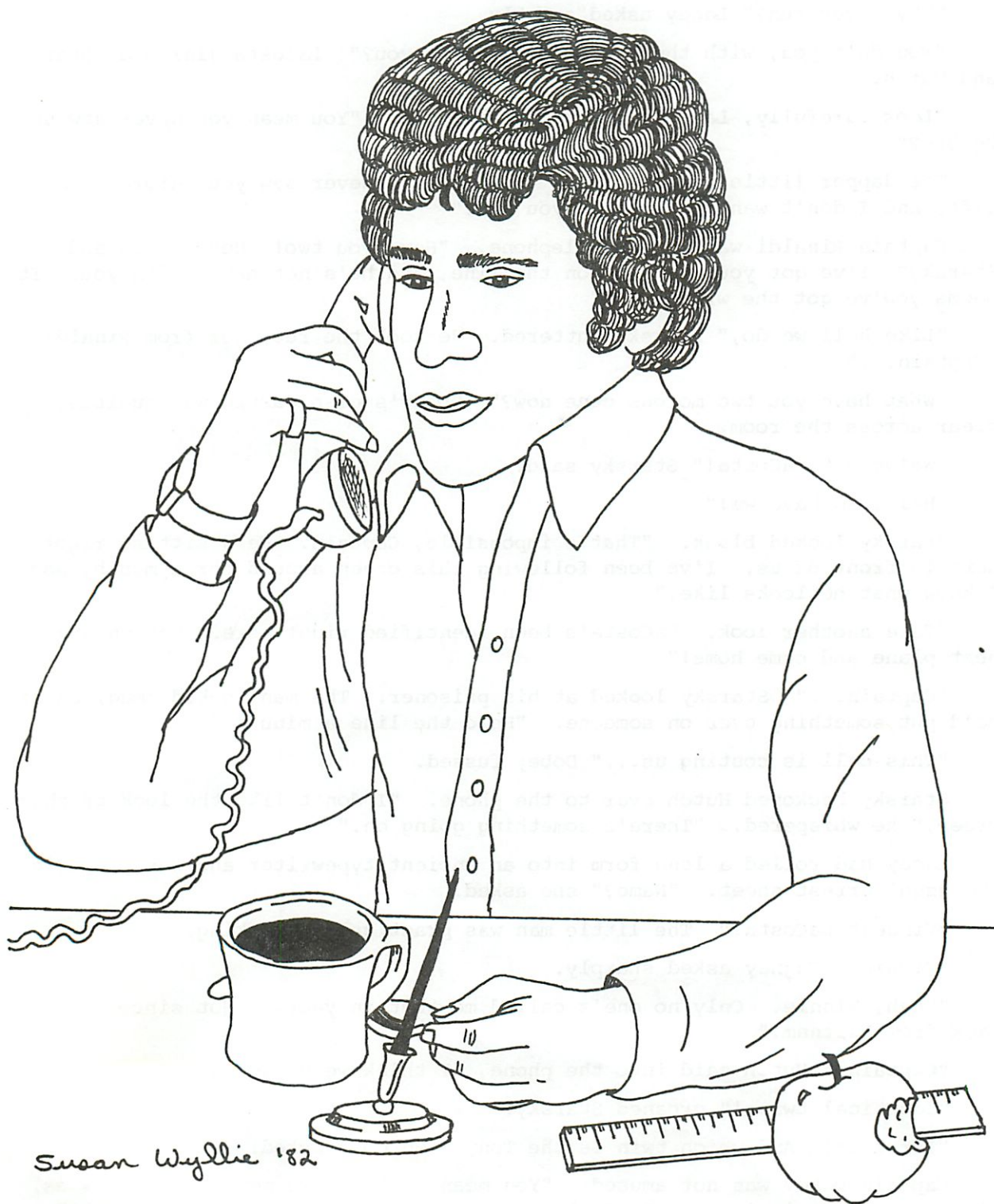
"Yeah, Vinnie. Only no one's called me that in years. Not since I got back from Vietnam."

"Captain," Hutch said into the phone, "I think we've got a LaCosta."

"Identical twins!" groaned Starsky.

"Terrific! And which twin is the Tony?" Hutch cracked.

Captain Dobey was not amused. "You mean we have two men, both LaCostas, and one of them is innocent? That one can sue the city for false arrest!"



"Which city?" Starsky muttered.

"Place of business?" Lacey, dogged as ever, was still typing the form.

"I run an art-supply store on the Avenue of the Americas, just north of Houston Street. Have you got me mixed up with my brother again? I thought I finished with that when we got back from 'Nam. He stayed on the coast, I came home, and I haven't seen him since. My brother and I..." He stopped in mid-sentence. Then, more calmly, he said: "I don't want to speak to him. If he's in some kind of trouble, I don't even want to know about it. He's a bum!"

Lacey frowned thoughtfully at her typewriter. "Would you please repeat that last address?"

"Houston Street." LaCosta sounded impatient. "Hew. Ston. H-O-U-S-T-O-N -- like the guy from Texas!" He took a deep breath and calmed down again. "Look, I'm sorry I ran. It's this town; it gets to you."

Lacey leaned over her typewriter, radiating sympathy. "You oughtta get out of this neighborhood. Move uptown, or Brooklyn. Grand Concourse, maybe?"

"Too rich for my blood," LaCosta said, with a self-deprecating shrug. "Can I go home now?"

"Yeah!" Lacey snapped out, tearing the paper from the typewriter. "And Starsky and Hutch will take you there -- right back to Los Angeles, where you came from!"

Everyone turned to stare at her. LaCosta blanched.

"Captain, hold on!" Hutch whispered into the phone. "Lacey, how do you know?"

"No one in New York calls it 'Avenue of the Americas'," Lacey said, her smile showing teeth. "It's Sixth Avenue, now and always! And it's How-ston Street, not Hew-ston! And the Grand Concourse is the South Bronx; even the junkies don't want to live there!"

Starsky grabbed the phone. "Cap, wait a minute! The one we got is--"

LaCosta lunged toward the open door of the squadroom.

Cagney caught him in the midsection with a well-placed kick. Hutch wrestled him back into his chair. The not-so-dapper little man sat gasping while Officer Lacey smiled triumphantly down at him.

"You and your brother came from Chicago, and right away you got nailed on Grand Theft, Auto. Then you went to 'Nam, so you never found out much about New York. But I bet you and Vinnie get in touch a lot more than you let on. Postcards, maybe?"

LaCosta did nothing but swear.

"You must've made the switch at L.A. airport, in the mens' room. Vinnie is now in Los Angeles... Hey, Starsky? Why don't you pull the same stunt on him?"

Starsky nodded, grinning sweetly. "Cap, ask the guy you've got how to get to Disneyland on the Santa Monica Freeway. --Yeah, I know you can't do that. Just ask him."

There was a brief silence, then sounds of a scuffle came over the phone.

Starsky made a thumbs-up sign. "Get those extradition papers to us, Captain. We've got Tony and you've got Vinnie. And I'll just bet that Vinnie is Tony's New York Connection -- with a little boost from some Big Boys in Chicago."

* * *

Tony LaCosta sat glumly while various officials were contacted and the paperwork was completed. Starsky and Hutch treated Cagney and Lacey to a lavish Chinese lunch, courtesy of the Diners' Club. By the time all the assorted documents were ready and the prisoner packed up to go, it was nearly 6 o'clock.

"...And that's that." Captain Rinaldi triumphantly put the final signature on the last scrap of paper.

"And this goes on record as our collar, right?" Cagney pressed.

Rinaldi regarded her sourly. "Still bucking for that shield, huh? Yeah, it'll go in your records. Now get these characters over to La Guardia. They got a flight to California in an hour, and they're supposed to be on it."

Tony LaCosta, handcuffed between Starsky and Hutch, was squeezed into the back seat of Mary-Beth Lacey's subcompact, for which he might conceivably have argued 'police brutality'. The New York rush-hour traffic seemed more intense than usual, and they managed to skid into the airport, with the aid of the siren, with 10 minutes to spare.

"Next time ya get in, give us a call," Lacey told Starsky. "Harvey makes a great pot-roast."

"And what do you make?" Hutch asked Cagney, his moustache twitching.

She beamed at him. "Let's just call it New York's Finest."

"Hutch, the plane's leaving!" Starsky dragged the prisoner and his partner down the ramp past the check-point.

* * *

Once settled on the plane, Starsky looked across the prisoner at his partner, noticing that he was unusually quiet. Hutch was staring out the window at a small patch of blue that could still be seen through the window of the observation tower.

"It's no good," Starsky said firmly. "She's here, and you're there."

"So I'll get her there," Hutch replied.

The two women in blue turned and were gone. They were having the exact same conversation, in fact. Somewhere, somehow, there was going to be another time for two cops that met and passed like ships in the night.





"Sweet Revenge" Quartet

Pat Messer

CORRIDOR

Tell me again
That it comes with the territory,
That it's part of the game,
That these are realities
We all face someday.

Tell me again,
And I'll start screaming.

In death's shadow
I stand awake, dreaming
Of the blood-stained pavement
And the siren's wail.

Erase these scenes,
These cruel memories,
Before they kill me.
I'm aching for release
From this steel shell of resignation.

"He's not going to make it."
My heart has turned to stone.
So cold...

Nothing's worth the agony
Of this vigil. Nothing!
Not duty,
Not friendship,
No, not even love.

I'm going to run from here,
Flee this empty corridor of sorrow,
A fugitive from pain.

Still, I wait.
Frozen, beyond hope,
Beyond despair.

Captive of chance.



ALIVE?

I want to hold you fast
In the strong arms of
my crazed joy.

I thought I'd never see
your face again...

The likes of which,
I know I've often said,
Belong in a comic book.
...Superman, maybe?

Who can blame me if I dance
a jig
With your somber private duty
nurse?

I thought I'd never see you
ever again.
And now, you've opened your
eyes.

You, then...alive?



HEY, MOVE OVER, BUDDY.

Every moment
Has such meaning now.

I know we've sat like this before,
Said such and such a thing,
Joked, talked and laughed.

Yet now when we see each other
It's as if some special secret
binds us together.

I can't believe it's real.
Pinch me,
Let me know I'm not dreaming.

Ouch!
How many times have I told you
Not to pinch me there?

People are talking?
I'm not even listening.
They aren't the ones
who almost lost you.

Sunsets now
Take on such varied color,
Their beauty makes me cry.

I dry my eyes, though.
You should see me
Only smiling, happy.

So very happy
To have you still beside me.

Hey, move over, buddy.
I'm getting in.

I'm not going to be
afraid
To say it, ever again:

I love you.
I need you.
You're my special friend.



WE'VE GOT TO STOP MEETING LIKE THIS.

If you jump into bed with me
One more time, pal,
People are going to talk.

It's not me I'm thinking of, kid;
It's you.
What about that lily-white
Reputation of yours?

Everybody knows I go for blonds
In a very big way.
Aren't you worried
About what they'll say?

I mean it, man.
We've got to stop meeting like this.

Hey!
Next time,
Try taking your shoes off
Before you get in bed.



Echoes

PART I

Nancy S. Hopson

Harry Mosley nervously studied the big man standing across the store-room. Most men were larger than Harry, but Karl Galvin was a giant by anyone's standards; half an inch over seven feet tall in his stockinged feet, he also liked to wear cowboy boots with three-inch heels. His considerable bulk was disguised by his height; most people thought him taller than he was because he looked so thin. Harry knew whom to be afraid of, and Galvin was that -- more so than any cop. His fear of the big man had made him agree to this meeting at the jail, which had never been on Harry's Most Popular Night-Spot list. Now the same fear was making him agree to Galvin's plans. He knew he was getting trapped again, and he was helpless to prevent it.

"You do what you're told, and you might live to your next birthday." Galvin savored the little man's fear as if it were a drink of especially good whiskey. "I don't plan to spend too much more time in this stinkin' hole, and there's just one way out. All I gotta do is make sure those cops don't testify." Galvin was 100% bully, but he was smarter than most people gave him credit for. Much as he wanted out right now, he knew jail gave him an iron-clad alibi. He was in no rush to get his bail.

"Sure," Harry hastened to agree, while his heart turned over. "Anything you say. You know you can count on me." He hoped Galvin didn't notice the sweat pouring down his face.

"You just see to it that I can go on counting on you." Galvin glared at Harry, reached into a pocket and withdrew a small package. "Take it." He held it out to the shaking little man. "Go on. It won't bite."

Reluctantly Harry left the small security of his chair to move toward Galvin. "Wh-what is it?" He took the package. It didn't weigh much.

"My ticket out of here." Galvin's smile chilled Harry's blood in his veins. "Just get this to my ol' lady. Here's the address. She knows what to do. Remember: if you wanta stay healthy, you do just what I tell you." He was going to say more when the door opened to admit one of the guards.

"Mosley'll have to go," the guard announced. "I can't stall anymore."

"Okay." Galvin handed a scribbled piece of paper to the now terrified little man, and moved out of the room. He stopped only once to glance back at Harry. "Just remember what I said. One mistake is all you get."

Harry exited moments later, just stopping himself from running. He felt sick. He couldn't stomach doing Galvin's dirty work, but if he didn't obey the behemoth he wouldn't have to worry about anything else, ever. He'd seen some of Galvin's victims, or what was left of them, and he didn't plan on becoming one of them. Slowly making his way down the street, he placed the package in his coat pocket. There was just no way out. He had to do everything he'd been told, and would be told. Trapped. Again.

* * *

Detective Sergeants Dave Starsky and Ken Hutchinson entered The Pits and elbowed their way to the bar. Each wore an exhausted look and walked with a

"How's it going?" Huggy Bear, behind the bar, studied the two as they sat down. "Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Don't ask," Hutch answered. "Just give us two beers."

"You'd think Dobey'd come up with something to get us off this," Starsky grumbled. "If I have to face one more 9-year-old kid, I think I'll go crazy."

"I know that somebody has to give the talks to the schoolkids, but I still think Chief Ryan's trying to get us for that last talk we had with the Commissioner." Hutch smiled briefly. "It sure livened things up when you brought in that chimpanzee made up like the Chief."

"Yeah. Too bad the chimp got away from us."

"I never saw so many people move so fast as those guys did trying to catch him."

"Yeah..." Starsky grinned, then sobered. "But was that any reason to stick us on the Kiddie Circuit?"

"Well..."

Huggy set glasses in front of them. "If it was me, I'd've made you jokers talk to 4-year-olds. You'd have more in common."

Before either man could think up a suitable retort, the phone rang. Huggy answered it and listened for a few seconds. Silently, he held it out toward the two detectives.

Starsky took a gulp of his beer and looked pointedly at his partner. "I gave the last speech; it's your turn. And if that's Dobey..." His expression spoke volumes.

Hutch sighed and took the receiver. "Hutchinson here."

Over the wire, Dobey's voice held a note Hutch couldn't quite place. "Is Starsky there with you?"

"Sure. What's up?" Hutch absently noted that The Pits had emptied out a bit in the past few minutes.

"We've got a body. He was beaten to death. Face smashed in. Looks like The Creeper is back in town."

Hutch straightened up. "When was the body found?"

Starsky looked toward him, suddenly interested.

"About four hours ago. You and Starsky are off classroom lectures as of now. I want the two of you on this one."

"Yeah. Understood."

The Creeper was to LA what Jack the Ripper had been to London. He struck every couple of years, killing three to six men, then faded back into wherever he came from. The first time he'd shown up had been eight years before, killing advertizing executives, all blond and 5'8" or thereabouts, three of them, all wearing The Creeper's signature: their belts had been removed from their bodies and used to tie their arms behind their backs -- after they'd been bludgeoned to death. Two years later, The Creeper moved on to a different type: Black hospital orderlies, six feet tall. There had been five deaths before The Creeper

disappeared again. The next group had been six elderly grandfather-types with canes. Ther. just two years ago it had been three red-haired disc-jockeys. Now The Creeper was back again.

"Captain..." Hutch almost didn't want to ask the next question. "What type was he this time?"

Dobey hesitated a long time.

Huggy and Starsky exchanged apprehensive glances and stared at Hutch, as if they had an inkling of what was to come.

"He was a cop," Dobey finally said. "Mid-30s, 5'11"...with black, curly hair."

Hutch glanced at Starsky, shocked. "Captain, that sounds like--"

"I know! It also sounds like a lot of other officers on the force. Now there's no way that each and every one of them can be watched efficiently. We're teaming them up with other officers, and everyone will be advised to take extra precautions. Right now that's the best we can do."

"Terrific. We'll be at the station within half an hour." Hutch handed back the receiver.

"Since when do we have to give Dobey a time-table?" Starsky asked.

"Since I decided to," Hutch answered with too-studied flippancy. He badly wanted to get Starsky out of the bar and to someplace safer, so they could determine their next move, but he knew he couldn't talk Starsky into that. The man's goofy self-confidence could be maddening at times. Starsky would probably laugh the whole thing off and take no special precautions beyond keeping his gun handy.

Trouble was, The Creeper was no normal adversary. He had eluded the police time and again, always one jump ahead of them. He could escape cordoned-off buildings. He had slipped through police roadblocks with the greatest of ease. It was like chasing a ghost. Any mention of The Creeper made the population of Los Angeles shudder collectively; if the fact that The Creeper was back should leak out to the public, the police might well have a panic on their hands.

"Come on. Dobey's waiting." Hutch moved impatiently to the door.

Starsky looked at Huggy, who shrugged, then glanced at his beer-glass. "We'll be back to finish our beers, Hug," he said.

Gesturing almost angrily toward the door, Hutch snapped, "Would you come on, already?"

* * *

Harry stared silently at the blonde, knowing that he couldn't say anything just then. If he tried, it would come out as a squeak. The woman had been an ugly surprise to him; he wasn't sure what he had expected, but it hadn't been the likes of Mandy Griffin.

She was no more than Harry's height, maybe 5'4" at most, but so authoritative -- and so damn fast with a knife -- that he forgot all about her size, her stunning physique, her sexy face and voice. It was almost like talking to Galvin, except that he didn't have to look up to see his oppressor's face.

"Look, scum..." The woman didn't bother to hide her contempt. "If Karl didn't need you, I'd--" She showed her teeth. The knife reappeared in her hand, whisked in front of Harry's nose and disappeared again, all in a split second.

That display scared Harry more than anything Galvin had said. The woman was an even bigger threat, and that took some doing. Harry tried to pay attention to her words, but it was hard to do with the fear making his heart pound so sickeningly.

"I've been checking those two hot-shots out." She didn't need to name the targets. "They stick together closer than paint on a wall. It's almost impossible to get one away from the other."

"I guess that takes care of that..." Harry dared to hope.

"I said almost." Griffin glared at him. "You better not mess this up."

"What do I haveta do?"

"There's a job opening at a place called The Pits, where they go a lot. You're to apply for the job, and let me know everything that goes on."

"What, uh, type of job is it?"

"Swamper."

* * *

He could be anyplace out there. Hutch peered into the growing darkness. *For that matter, he could be anybody. Damn!* He glanced at his partner out of the corner of his eye. *How in hell do we catch this scum? Where do we start?* Hutch chewed his lower lip. This case had a bad feel to it already, and not just because Starsky might be a target. The Creeper was a real whacko. He had to be; there was no reason for any of the killings, no connection between victims, no pattern but the MO itself.

The only sure thing in this crazy case was that Hutch had to keep his partner from becoming a statistic on The Creeper's scoreboard.

They pulled up in front of the building. "Come on, Dobey's waiting," said Hutch, hurrying out of the car and take a quick look around. When Starsky didn't follow him immediately, he bent down to look into the car's interior. "Didn't you hear me?"

"I was just waiting for you to tell me what our case is supposed to be." Starsky's blue eyes held another question than the one on his lips. "Or didn't you plan to let me in on it?"

"Sure I did! I just..." Hutch licked his lips. "Oh, hell..."

"Hutch?"

"It's The Creeper."

"Another Creeper murder?" Starsky's face showed his dismay. "What's the type this time?"

"I...think you should ask Dobey. He's got all the facts, at least all there are."

"Some reason why you shouldn't tell me?"

Catching his partner's eyes, Hutch came to a decision. It was, after all, Starsky's life -- even to throw away, much as that thought hurt. "A cop..." Hutch pushed down his fears. *Ever since I almost lost Starsk to Gunther's mechanics, I've been...maybe overprotective...* "Mid-30s. 5'11". Black curly hair."

Starsky looked puzzled. "Sounds familiar," he mused. "Who do I know like that? ...Well, it'll come to me." He got out of the car and headed into the building.

His partner stared after him, dumbfounded, wondering if it were really possible that Starsky didn't recognize the description. *Doesn't he look in the mirror often enough?* Hutch shook his head, trying to clear it. Maybe Starsky was too tired. Maybe they both were.

"Hey," Starsky called from the doorway. "You coming?"

Snapping out of his reverie, Hutch locked the car and went to join his partner. "Starsk, you really don't...?" His voice petered out.

"I really don't what?" Starsky asked as they entered Dobey's office.

"Where've you two been?" Dobey growled at them. "You told me half an hour; it's been almost twice that." He didn't want the two officers to know what had been nibbling at his mind as he'd sat waiting.

"My fault, Cap," Starsky grinned.

"Don't let it happen again! ...Has Hutchinson filled you in on what's going down?"

"Yeah. The Creeper's out of his cage again." Starsky's face lost its grin. "And a guy who could've been my brother got in his way."

Hutch shot a venomous look at Starsky. *So it was a put-on! Damn you, I knew you'd react this way!*

"The officer's name was Gregory Evanson. He'd been with the force three years." Dobey handed Starsky a folder. "It's all in there. I want results this time; the city can't afford to have The Creeper roaming its streets."

"Nobody wants him locked up more than I do, Captain," Hutch said coldly. "After all, I'm not getting any younger."

"What's your age got to do with it?" Starsky puzzled.

"The way things are going, The Creeper's gonna make you one of his victims -- and I just don't have the time to train a new partner."

Starsky gave him a sour look. "Thanks a lot, pal!"

"Knock it off, you two." Dobey scowled at them. "Go on and get to work."

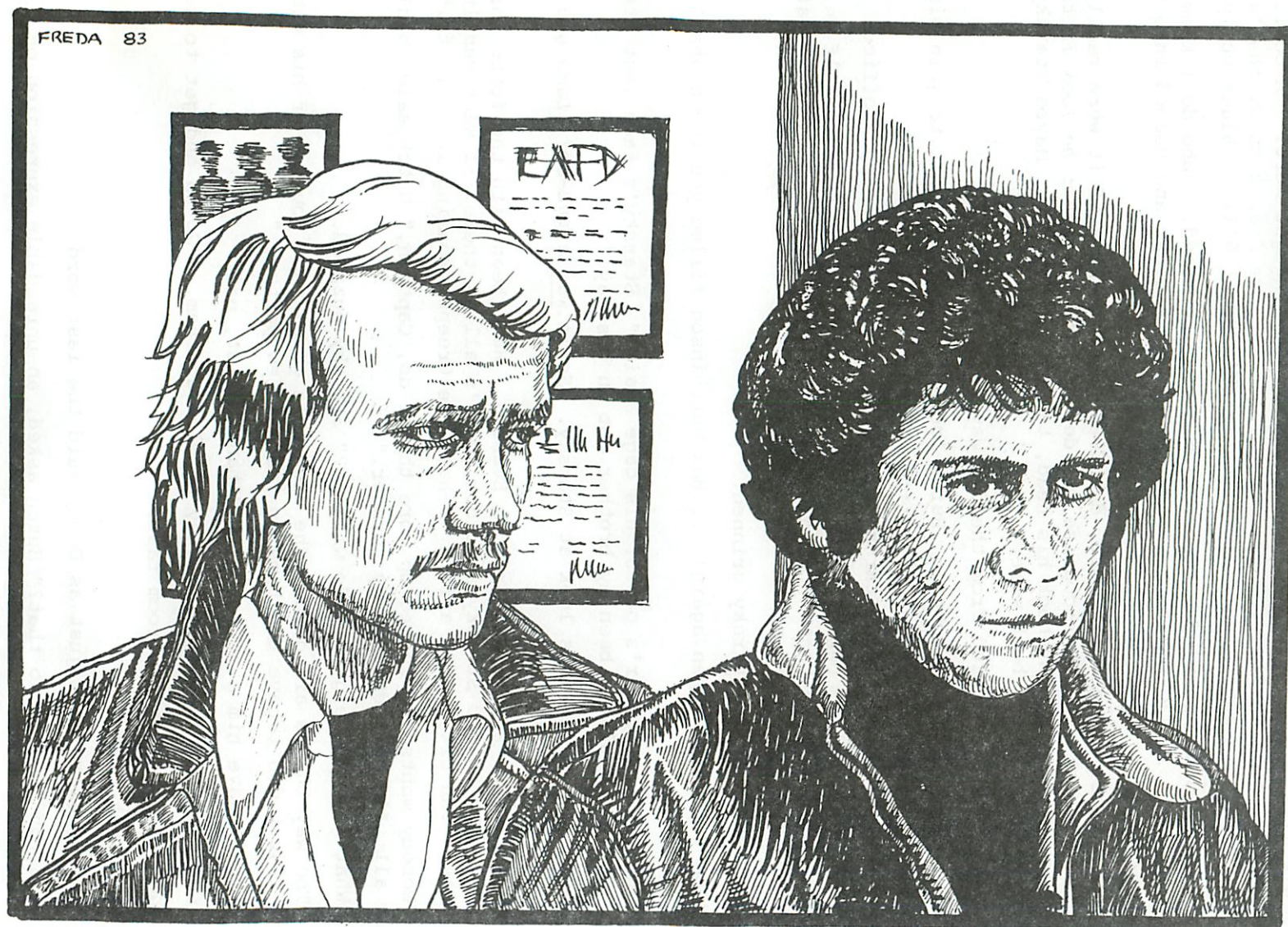
The two men left the room fast.

"And shut that door!"

Starsky slammed it just as Dobey said the last word.

"Did you have to do that?" Hutch asked, an unreadable expression on his face.

"My hands were full."



"I don't mean the door."

"Don't worry." Starsky turned on his most heart-melting smile. "I'll be OK."

"Course you will." Hutch turned toward their desks. "What could happen to a big tough jackass like you?"

"Not a thing, sweetheart," Starsky grinned. "Not one damn thing. Gunther used up all my bad luck. From here on in, it's clear sailing."

* * *

Harry looked up at the thin black man. "I heard you hadda job opening."

"Where'd you hear that?" Huggy looked the small man up and down.

"Just around," Harry said uneasily.

A vague apprehension bothered Huggy Bear, but he put it down to the fact that The Creeper was back in town. "OK. We'll try it for a few days, and if things work out, the job is yours." He smiled, trying to ease the man's obvious tension. Maybe the little creep was just too long unemployed. Maybe he was a parolee, and needed any kind of work to keep from going back to the cage. "We start at 6 PM."

"Sure." Harry smiled sickly. "Whatever you say." He shook his head and hurried off.

Huggy watched Harry rush out of the bar. *Strange little dude. Almost like he didn't want the job. Have to keep an eye on that one...* His puzzlement was replaced by another as Hutch arrived, alone. Since the Creeper murder it was rare to see one of them without the other. "Where's Starsky?"

"He said to meet him here. Isn't he...?" Hutch glanced rapidly around the interior, frown deepening. Then he slammed his fist down on the bar. "Damn! I shouldn't have let him go off on his own!"

"Hey, man--" Huggy grabbed Hutch's arm. "Lighten up. You can't be with him every minute, and you can't run his life for him. He's only a little bit late. He'll be all right." Grinning for Hutch's benefit, Huggy went back behind the bar. "You know that cat has one charmed life."

Hutch pulled out his watch and compared it to the wall-clock behind the bar. "15 minutes, Hug. Then I go looking for him."

There didn't seem to be anything to say to that, so Huggy waited in silence, trying to keep himself busy, counting the minutes as the hand of the clock moved on. He didn't want to add to Hutch's distress, but he was beginning to feel uneasy himself as the moments ticked by. It wasn't like Starsky to let his friends worry unnecessarily about him. He'd call if he could. *And if he can't?* Huggy shied away from that thought.

As the minute-hand moved past Hutch's deadline, both men looked from the clock to the door, hoping to see the dark-headed detective come in with an excuse, but no Starsky appeared.

"Something's wrong. Starsk wouldn't just leave me hanging like this." Hutch looked at Huggy, his eyes reflecting apprehension. "I never shoul've left him alone."

"If you need some help lookin'..."

Before Hutch could reply, the door opened to admit a slightly reeling Starsky. He stumbled toward the two men and stopped a couple feet from them. His face held a vague and bemused grin. "Hi, Hutch. Huggy." He snickered faintly.

"Where the hell have you been?" Hutch struggled with his relief and anger. "I go to your apartment, and all I find is a note telling me to meet you here, and you're over an hour late. The least you could've done was call!"

Starsky blinked at him, cheeks reddening.

"All right. So where were you, Starsk?" Hutch asked tiredly.

"Visiting Terry's grave." Starsky's face lost its grin. He lurched to one of the tables and sat down. "Then I stopped for some lunch." His hands trembled.

"If you wanted that type of lunch," Huggy sniffed, "You could've had it here."

"Wha'ja mean? I only hadda san'wich an' a root beer."

"Looks like you had the beer without any root."

Hutch moved to his partner's side and knelt beside him, worried look returning. He studied Starsky's face. "Drunk or sober, Starsky doesn't lie to me," he said. "He claims he just had root-beer. I believe him."

"Tha's nice..." Starsky said to no one in particular. He was clearly having trouble focussing.

"Uh, maybe we should call him a doctor?" Huggy glanced toward the phone.

"I'm a doctor," Starsky snickered. The pupils of his eyes contracted to the size of pinheads.

Hutch stood up, mental alarm-bells ringing. "I think we should take him to the nearest emergency room." He put a hand under Starsky's arm to help him up. "Come on, Starsk."

"Where're we goin'?" Starsky asked vaguely. He was shaking hard now, and didn't seem to notice it.

"To get you some help." Hutch led him to the door, Huggy following.

The drive to the hospital usually took only 20 minutes; this time it took twice as long. They had to stop every few minutes to help Huggy keep Starsky in the car. Starsky kept trying to jump out, insisting that he could run over the tops of the cars on the highway all the way to San Bernardino.

The trio entered the emergency room and headed for the desk. A harried-looking nurse stood behind it, filling out forms. She glanced up at the three men, and went back to what she had been doing.

Hutch waited patiently for a few minutes, but when it became obvious that the woman had no intention of noticing them his self-control evaporated. "Damn it!" he roared, slamming his hand down on the desk top, "This man could be dying, and you stand there fiddling with those goddamned papers!"

"Sir--" the nurse began in a strained voice.

"Never mind the excuses. Just call a doctor."

With a haughty look, the nurse reached behind the desk and brought out

a blank information form. "This has to be filled out before he--" She let a look of disgust fall on Starsky. "--Can be seen."

Hutch grabbed her wrist, his temper flaring. "Look," he said, his voice deadly calm, "He's going to see a doctor. Now."

"Hey, man..." Huggy started, but let the words die as he caught the expression on Hutch's face.

"What's going on here?" A doctor came into the waiting room.

"This gentleman--" Sarcasm dripped from the nurse's voice as Hutch let go her wrist. "--Wants his friend seen by a doctor, but objects to filling out the paperwork."

Hutch turned toward the doctor. "He could be dying, and she--"

"I'd hardly call drunkenness an emergency," the nurse broke in, nastily.

Hutch turned back to her, seething, but the doctor reprimanded her before Hutch could say anything. "That will be enough, Mrs. Suarez." He moved over toward Starsky. "What's the problem?"

Starsky grinned feebly. "Hi, Doc," he murmured. "How's tricks?" Without waiting for an answer, he started sliding toward the floor. It took Huggy, the doctor and Hutch to keep him upright.

"Mrs. Suarez!" the doctor gasped, "Get a wheelchair!"

"Yessir." She was all business now.

Within seconds Starsky was settled into a wheelchair with an orderly to take care of him. "Take him to room 3." The doctor turned brusquely on Hutch. "Now will you please fill out these forms?" He handed the blank papers to Hutch and went off toward where Starsky had been taken.

Hutch started to follow, but felt pressure on his arm. He looked up, and his eyes met Huggy's.

"Cool off, man." Huggy led the blond cop toward a chair. "All you can do for him now is fill out the damn forms." ...*And try to cool it. You've been so damn prickly since Gunther's goons shot him. I wonder...*

It seemed forever before the doctor returned. Hutch abandoned the papers and jumped to his feet. "How's Starsky?"

"Just when did your friend become a speed freak?" the doctor asked without preamble.

Hutch slowly sat down, not quite able to believe his ears.

"Wha... What?" Huggy managed to say.

"He's so full of uppers, if we didn't have him strapped down he'd be floating all over this hospital." The doctor looked at the two men sitting before him with no compassion whatever.

"No..." Hutch shook his head dazedly. "Starsk wouldn't... Not him."

Huggy laid a hand on his friend's arm, then looked up at the doctor. "You sure, man? I mean, there's no room for doubt?"

"That man is so full of amphetamines..." The doctor stopped at the look that crossed Hutch's face. "There's no mistake. I'm sorry."

Hutch stood up. "Where is he? Can I see him?"

The doctor nodded. "Go down the hall, last door on the left."

Hutch stumbled off down the corridor, his mind numb. This didn't make any sense; there was just no way that Starsky could have taken speed.

The hospital room was dimly lit. Hutch opened the door and peeked around it. He saw Starsky lying silently, looking out the window.

"Hey, buddy..." Hutch tried to sound cheerful as he came in.

Starsky didn't acknowledge his partner's presence. He continued to stare into the distance, neither moving nor speaking.

Hutch moved over to the bed. "Starsky?" He was beginning to get downright scared. "Starsky!" He put a hand on his partner's shoulder and gave it a shake.

"I hear ya," Starsky said quietly.

Hutch could scarcely believe the change. Only 25 minutes ago Starsky had been so hyperactive he could barely be kept in the car; now he seemed hardly able to move his eyes, let alone talk. "How's it going?" Hutch could feel his eyes misting. *Stupid question. I left him alone, and now... I failed him.* He knew he was overreacting, being too sensitive, treading a fine line here. *I just can't seem to stop... No. I can stop this. Pull yourself together, Hutch-
inson.*

Starsky made a concentrated effort and turned his head toward his friend. "'M okay..." The words were toneless and only just above a whisper. His eyes fell closed.

"Yeah. You'll be fine, buddy." Hutch grasped Starsky's hand, but there was no answering pressure. "I'll be back later; you just take it easy for now. Try and sleep." He gave what he hoped was a confident smile, not sure how much Starsky heard or understood, and left the room.

Huggy rose as Hutch made his way back into the waiting area. "How is he?"

Hutch bit his lip to keep the insidious tears back. *What can I tell him? I don't understand it myself... Enough! I've got to stop acting like a scared kid. Be a man. Go on with the job no matter what you're feeling...* "Lousy."

Huggy rested an understanding hand on his friend's arm. "Come on, let's go back to my place and get you that overdue lunch. There's nothing we can do here for now." He pulled gently on Hutch's arm and led the blond cop out of the hospital. He was surprised that Hutch offered no resistance; it didn't seem normal.

They had almost reached the car when Hutch pulled up short. "Hug, I'm going back to the station."

"What?!"

"I'm a cop. I have to act like one. No matter what's happening, I've still got a job to perform."

That wasn't what Huggy had been hoping to hear. Clearly Starsky couldn't continue the investigation, but would Dobey let Hutch continue on his own? The last attempt to team Hutch with a new partner had been a big mistake. "Dobey's not gonna let up on Starsky without a helluva good reason," Huggy prodded, needing to know what Hutch's frame of mind was. "Hadn't you better find out how your partner got doped before you talk to the Captain?"

"Starsk took care of me after Ben Forrest doped me; I'm not going to let him take flak for this..." Hutch thought for a moment, then sighed. "You're right. Starsky would never have taken drugs on his own. I'm going to find out who's responsible for this. Dobey will just have to find somebody else to look for The Creeper."

* * *

After Harry left The Pits he made for the nearest bus stop. Griffin wanted a direct report as soon as possible. At least he wouldn't have to tell her that he hadn't gotten the job. It had been a lucky stroke, he was certain; maybe his luck was beginning to change. It seemed to go in spurts. Ever couple of years some creep leaned on him, but each time he managed to get out from under. He only wished he could remember the details of those escapes; it would come in handy the next time someone tried to take advantage of him.

Harry shook his head sadly. Nothing ever went easy for him, not in his entire life. His old man had been forever belting him whenever any little thing went wrong. His mother had said it was because he was handy, but Mom was just as handy, and Harry noticed that Pop never so much as raised his voice at her. Ah, women! *You can't trust them, either. I was just 6 when Mom disappeared. Pop never talked about her after that, but I heard the neighbors talking. They said she ran off with the garbage man. He disappeared about the same time...*

The arrival of the bus broke into Harry's thoughts. He climbed aboard, paid his fare, went to the back and sat down next to a woman who glared at him. Sighing to himself, Harry went back to his catalog of troubles. He was so wrapped up in them that when his stop came he almost sat right through it. He hurriedly pulled the cord. The bus screeched its brakes. This time Harry received glares from the bus driver and all the other passengers, as well as the lady in the back seat.

Harry stumbled off the bus, furiously embarrassed. He decided that he hated riding busses. *Hell, I hate using anything but my own two feet. I know the drivers despise me. Everybody does. But when you rely on your own two feet, you know the quickest way from any point in town to any other point. I'm a real expert on that. In fact, I can get to some places faster than anybody else, even when they use a car...*

He looked up at the building he was approaching, and shuddered. He'd lived in the same sort of run-down buildings all his life, but she was waiting inside this one. He still felt that the woman was his greatest danger. Galvin at least was still in jail, so there was some small question of how effective his threats might be. There was no question that Mandy Griffin was willing and able to carry out hers. *Jesus, that knife...* Harry was sweating again.

* * *

Harold Dobey sat waiting in his office, glancing at his watch, his expression getting grimmer by the minute. "I told them to contact me at 2 o'clock," he muttered. Whether or not there was anything to report, the Captain set strict times for his men to report in. He meant to keep tabs on them constantly since this second murder.

The first officer had been killed just a few blocks from the station house, just coming off duty. The next victim had been killed at his home. It was as if

the killer had been watching them, playing with them. He seemed able to find them no matter where they were. Legend called The Creeper a phantom who struck without warning, wherever and whenever he chose, elusive as a vampire.

Dobey was just picking up the receiver of his phone when the door to the office opened to admit two men, Hutchinson leading. "Where the hell have you two been?" he started to steam at them.

Then he noticed that it was Huggy Bear with Hutch, not Starsky.

"Where's your partner?" Dobey didn't like the look in Hutch's eyes. It reminded him of the days after the Gunther shooting, when Hutch had thought his partner was dying.

"Captain--" Huggy began.

"Hutchinson can speak for himself! Why don't you go back to that place you laughingly call a bar?"

"Cap..." Hutch looked at Dobey with despair.

"What's wrong, Ken?"

"Starsky's in the hospital. Somebody got to him with--"

"What?! Why wasn't I notified at once? I told you I wanted to be told as soon as The Creeper made his next move! Damn, I thought that after Jablonski The Creeper would lay off for a few days..."

"Jablonski?" Hutch did a double-take.

"The call came in a couple hours ago. When he didn't show up for work this morning the watch commander sent out an officer to check up on him." Dobey shook his head slowly. "Found him beaten to death in his bedroom. Apparently The Creeper was waiting for him when he went home last night."

Hutch dropped into a nearby chair. "Two down," he sighed. "Christ, when is this going to end?"

"Two?" Dobey stared at him for a moment, then visibly relaxed. "The fact that Starsky's still alive may be our first big break. He can answer questions that the other victims couldn't."

"Captain..." Huggy tried again.

This time he was cut off by the phone ringing. Dobey answered, then held it toward Hutch. "It's for you. A Dr. Rittenhouse. Says it's urgent."

Hutch grabbed the phone. "What is it, Doctor? How's Starsky?" He listened for a few moments, then his face drained to a gray pallor. "How could you let that happen?!" he shouted into the receiver.

Dobey yanked the phone from his hand. "This is Harold Dobey, Starsky and Hutchinson's commanding officer. What's happened?"

Over the wire, Dr. Rittenhouse's voice sounded irritable. "As I tried to explain to Officer Hutchinson, we had no idea that Officer Starsky would try to leave the hospital. One of the student nurses unstrapped him and then left to get an item she had forgotten. When she returned, he was gone."

"Unstrapped him?" Dobey lit on that.

"It was the only way to move him safely. We were going to run a few tests.

FREDA 83



I still don't know where he got the strength to move; he was practically comatose. I didn't expect a change that quickly."

"Change? From what? And why was Starsky strapped down in the first place?"

Huggy looked from Dobey's scowling face to Hutch's stricken one.

Dobey turned to glare at both of them. "Thank you for notifying us, Doctor." He spoke into the phone without taking his eyes off Hutch and Huggy. "I'll be sending an officer down to take your statement." Silently, he hung up the phone.

Huggy scrunched lower in his chair. Hutch didn't move.

Dobey stared at the two before him with a stoney expression for a few seconds. Then he picked up the phone again. "I want a patrol car sent to West Side General. A patient in for drug therapy has disappeared. The hospital will give all the information to the officer when he gets there."

"Captain--" The strain was beginning to show in Hutch's voice. "I'll handle this one."

Dobey slammed the receiver back on the phone. "You've already got a case! I'll find someone to help on your investigation."

"No!" Hutch surged to his feet, eyes burning with outrage. "I don't think you understand, Captain."

Dobey looked up, taking in the blond's expression and rigid stance. "Then make me understand." His own scowl didn't waver an inch.

"I would've seen this coming, Captain. There's no way that Starsk could've hidden anything like a drug habit from me. No way. There's got to be another explanation, and I want the chance to find it. --And I'm going to find Starsky." That last was a statement of fact.

Dobey guessed that Hutch would go out looking for Starsky no matter what anybody said, or did. He accepted that; if Hutch had done otherwise Dobey would really have been worried. "All right. I'll put somebody else on The Creeper. For now."

Huggy and Hutch started out of the room, but pulled up short as Dobey picked up the phone. "Remember--" he warned. "I want to be kept up to date on this thing. No more nasty surprises. Now get the hell out of here!"

* * *

Dr. Rittenhouse put down the phone and looked up at Mandy Griffin. "You were right," he grinned. "Hutchinson hadn't told anyone about Starsky being doped."

"I didn't think he would," she smiled in return, spreading her white skirt over her legs as she slid around on the couch to face the doctor. "They're a pair of hot-shots, look out for each other all the time. Hutchinson's covering for him will make him look bad in court. It was great luck you were there when they brought Starsky in; saves me the trouble of faking the lab report."

"I'm still not sure how much this is going to help Galvin." A tiny frown appeared on the doctor's face.

"The cops think Starsky is on speed, right? Well, that would make his

statements suspect. Now when we get rid of him it'll look like he got mugged after he left the hospital, maybe even trying to score some more speed. They won't think anything about pulling his testimony, not after they find the body. As for Hutchinson, he's just discredited himself."

Rittenhouse's frown deepened. "You never said anything about wasting Starsky. That's, *hmm...*"

"Sure." The woman's tone turned loftily sarcastic. "We're going to let him live to tell everyone that he wasn't really a speed-freak, maybe even dig up believable evidence to back him. That would really help Karl, now wouldn't it?"

"He's a cop. I don't want anything to do with killing a cop."

"Relax." Grinning like an evil caricature of the Cheshire Cat, Griffin rose and glided toward the door. "They're only human. They go down just like everybody else." She looked at her watch. "Mosely should be wondering where I am. Don't want the little twerp to get too upset." She reached out to open the door. "Keep me informed. And Doctor..."

"Yes?"

"Don't ever think of crossing us." She opened the door and slid through it. "Just remember, I'll be around."

* * *

"Huggy..." Hutch hesitated. "Should I drop you off somewhere?"

Huggy could hear a different question. "I'd like to help you look for Starsky. That is, if you can use the help."

Hutch glanced at the man beside him and smiled briefly. "Thanks."

"I'll make a phonecall to Anita and ask her to open up for me."

Hutch parked his car in the hospital lot and started for the building. "I'll meet you in the lobby," he said, "After I've talked to Rittenhouse."

"Meanwhile I'll look for a phone. After I talk to Anita, I'll put out some feelers. We'll turn something up."

Hutch smiled again, but it didn't reach his eyes. The two men walked into the lobby and separated, each to his different task.

All the way to Rittenhouse's office, Hutch could think of only one thing: how Starsky had looked the last time he'd seen him. *Damn! He couldn't have run off in that condition!* Hutch slammed his fist against his leg. None of this made any sense. He took a deep breath to clear his head. *All right, one step at a time. Day before yesterday, Doherty called us in to put us on The Creeper. Starsky was all right before then. I'd stake my life on it.* Hutch paused outside Rittenhouse's office, determined to think this through. *There wasn't a trace of drugs on him before this afternoon... The root-beer! "I only had a sandwich and a root-beer." Somebody put something in it... And then stole him out of the hospital!! The only answer. So how? And who? ...How do I find the restaurant? Or hotdog stand, or pushcart... No, that's hopeless. Too many possibilities, no leads. ...Besides, how would anyone know where Starsky would go for lunch? He's so unpredictable... No, they had to be shadowing him. Stalking. Followed him to the hospital -- or guessed he'd be taken there -- then snatched*

him. This was well planned... Now if I can just find Starsky before anything else happens to him... Hutch knocked on the office door.

"Come in." The doctor's voice was slightly muffled.

Hutch opened the door and walked into the office. "Dr. Rittenhouse," he began with an ominous ripple in his voice. "Just what the hell is going on here?"

* * *

"Mister..." The girl shook the prone figure cautiously. "Hey, mister, you all right?"

The man moaned softly, but gave no other sign that he heard.

She moved away. "You stay there," she called back over her shoulder. "I'll go get some help, maybe call the firemen..."

Before she could take another step, a man moved out of the shadows toward her. She started slightly, then recovered when she saw who it was. "Richie, you scared me. What you doing here?"

Richie nodded back toward the sprawled body. "Who's that?"

"I dunno. Just found him like that. I was gonna call the paramedics."

Richie grabbed the girl by the arm. "That's not your job."

"Leggo, you're hurting me!"

He dropped her arm. "I'll do more than that if you don't start hustling. You're down almost \$300." He strolled toward the body. "I'll take care of this guy. You just hurry on to your next appointment. Can't keep a customer waiting."

The girl gave him an apprehensive look, but moved off, saying nothing.

Richie looked down at the motionless man, and couldn't see anything worth stealing. He pulled his foot back for a kick.

The man flashed out an arm, grabbed the leg Richie was standing on and pulled it out from under him. The pimp hit the ground with a loud whomp. Before he had a chance to regain his balance, the man slugged him unconscious.

Safe now. For awhile, anyway... The shadowy man rose from the ground and glanced around the alley. He looked down uncertainly at Richie, then at himself. His reaction had been pure instinct; he couldn't for the life of him remember more than the past few minutes, when he had come to in this alley to find that girl standing over him. He realized for the first time that he was wearing a hospital gown and robe. He shook his head to try and clear it, but winced at the pain that ran across his forehead.

What am I doing here? he wondered. Why'd this jerk want to hurt me? How'd I get hurt in the first place? I seem to've been in a hospital... But how'd I get here? Where's 'here', anyway? ...And who am I?

All he could be sure of was that this place was dangerous. For all he knew, the whole dark world out there could be dangerous. He had no memories, no knowledge, to guide him safely through it. Rising fear chilled him.

After looking again to see if there was anybody around, he returned his attention to the pimp. They seemed to be the same size. He smiled tightly. They

even looked somewhat alike. He pulled the unconscious pimp back into the depths of the alleyway, and hurriedly exchanged clothes.

"Couldn't go out dressed as I was. Thanks, Richie." He gave the pimp a mock salute. "Now to see if I can find out what the hell is going on."

Slipping out of the alley he stopped under a streetlight to survey the dark street, his blue eyes fearful and haunted. There was nobody near. Shaking his curly dark head slowly, he moved off into the night.

* * *

"You just follow orders, creep," Griffin snarled at Harry, "And maybe you live to get old."

"But if you've already got the cop taken care of, what do you need me for?" Harry whined.

Griffin narrowed her lips for a moment before answering. "How did you live this long, being so stupid? There are two of them, dummy! We have to take care of them both before Karl gets out." She glanced at her watch. "The boys have probably gotten rid of the body by now."

As if on cue, the phone rang. She nodded at Harry to answer it.

"Mosley--" Harry's voice was barely audible. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Mosley here."

"Miss Griffin there?" a male voice answered.

"Sure, sure." Harry handed her the phone.

"Yeah?" she snapped. "Ah, Walt. The little matter of one body taken care of?"

"Uh, Miss Griffin..." The man's voice was shakey. "There's, uh, there's been a little problem."

"What?!"

"We got him to the alley, like you told us." The man's fear was almost tangible. "And we started to take care of him. We was really givin' him a good goin' over. You'd've loved it--"

"Never mind that. What went wrong?"

"Somebody came into the alley. Me an' Isas had to split. Miss Griffin, ma'am, he was still alive."

"Didn't either of you brains hang around to take care of him afterwards?"

"Yeah." The relief in Walt's voice came over the wire. "Whoever it was went away, didn't do nothin'. We came back later. The cop'd pulled himself back into the far end of the alley. Must've been tiring, 'cause he was out like a light. We did a good job on him. Just like The Creeper. He's been killing cops lately, so we figured--"

"The Creeper?!" Griffin almost screamed. "You idiots! This was supposed to look like just another mugging! Now the cops'll keep the damn investigation open 'til something breaks on the goddam Creeper! If this wrecks Karl's chances,

I'll personally take care of each and every mother's son of you!"

She slammed the phone down hard.

* * *

Rittenhouse looked up, amazement written on his face. "Detective Hutchinson?"

"You seem surprised to see me, Doctor." Hutch kept tight hold on himself now; flying off the handle at everyone wouldn't help him or Starsky.

"I...I assumed that it would be-- would be another officer." Rittenhouse slowly licked his lips, as if his mouth were dry.

"Starsky's my partner. Why would you think someone else would be handling this?" Hutch's tension made his tone more menacing than he intended. "Do you have some objection to me?" *Why's he so nervous?*

Rittenhouse was saved answering by a knock at the office door.

"Come in!" The relief in the doctor's voice made Hutch stare at him.

The door opened to admit Huggy Bear. "Hey man, can I speak with you for a minute?" He looked meaningfully at Hutch.

Confused, Hutch nodded toward the hall. "I'll be back, Doctor." He smiled with his mouth only. *Won't hurt to keep him sweating...* "Try to come up with better answers than you've been giving me."

The doctor seemed to wilt in his chair.

Hutch followed the black man out into the hallway. "What's going on, Hug?"

Huggy looked up and down the hall to make sure they weren't being overheard. "Man, have I got an earful," he whispered. "Dig: the good doctor in there has mob connections! I just found out from a friend of Anita's. He's in on some plan to ice two cops. Who for, I couldn't find out -- but he's been close with Walt Brannon, Karl Galvin and Isas Kawabe."

So that's who got to Starsk here! Hutch looked back at the doctor's office for a few seconds before turning again to Huggy. His eyes were fierce. "A lot of things are beginning to make sense. Those three would love to get at Starsk and me, but only one has a really urgent need to. Galvin! And if Galvin's behind this, that means Mandy Griffin is handling things on the outside. That woman's worse than ten scorpions...and she has drug connections. It all fits. Thanks, Hug."

"Any time." Huggy watched Hutch walk back into the office, wondering if there would be murder done -- or maybe just Police Brutality.

Rittenhouse eyed Hutch warily, his nervousness all too evident. "I don't have too much more to tell you than I did over the phone," he tried.

"No?" Hutch's voice was silky smooth.

"Only what he was wearing at the time: a hospital gown and robe." The doctor played absent-mindedly with a pen, never taking his eyes off Hutch.

"Nothing else to say?" Hutch stalked closer.

"What else could there be?" Rittenhouse's voice almost cracked.

"How about telling me how much Mandy Griffin paid you for this job?" Hutch pounced. "And then you could let me know what really happened to Detective Starsky."

Rittenhouse went dead-pale, but had the sense to say nothing.

Hutch grabbed his lapels and yanked him out of his chair. "Talk, punk! Where's Starsky? What've Griffin and her goons done with him? Answer me, dammit!" He slammed the doctor back against the wall.

Rittenhouse wasn't used to being treated like a common street-punk, and he couldn't take it. "I- I wanted no part of it!" he babbled wildly. "I told her it was crazy, wasting a cop..."

His voice died away at the look that came onto Hutch's face.

"How?" Hutch barely managed to say the word.

"She- she had a couple of her goons take him toward the docks and..."

"Go on."

"...they...they were going to make it look like a mugging..." Rittenhouse looked decidedly unhappy.

Hutch raised one fist. He was raking his eyes over the cowering doctor, looking for a suitable target, when the phone rang. "Answer it," he said through clenched teeth, releasing the man.

Rittenhouse snatched up the receiver. "Y-yes?" He listened for a second, then placed it on top of the desk. "It's...it's for you. Captain Dobey."

Hutch lifted the receiver. "Hutchinson. What's up?"

The door opened behind him. Huggy peered through.

"Ken." Dobey's tone was quiet and careful. "A report just came in, of a body near the docks. It...sounds like..."

"Starsky." Hutch's voice was emotionless. "I know. Doctor Rittenhouse was just telling me how he helped Mandy Griffin to get him."

"WHAT?!?" Dobey's roar could be heard by Huggy and Rittenhouse. "I'm sending a squad car right over, and I'll be there myself in 15 minutes." He hesitated. "Ken, wait for me there. Okay?"

Silently, Hutch placed the receiver back on the phone. He looked with unseeing eyes at the cowering doctor, fighting with himself. Finally he came to a decision. "Griffin. Where is she staying?"

"1023 Ocean View." Sweat stood out on the doctor's upper lip. "I- I didn't know they were going to kill him until- until after they'd already taken him off. You've got to believe me!"

Hutch could barely keep from throttling him. "Some squad cars will be here soon. Stick around. If I have to come looking for you, it won't be as a cop. Understand?"

Rittenhouse looked ready to faint. "Any- anything you want. Anything!"

Hutch gave him a look of infinite disgust, and turned to the door.

Huggy blocked his way. "Maybe you should wait for Dobey?"

"No."

"I didn't think I could talk you out of this. I'm comin' with you."

"Huggy..." Hutch's voice held a warning note.

"You'll have to go over me otherwise." He put out a hand toward Hutch, withdrew it as his friend tensed. "I know you can do it, but I won't make it easy. Don't forget one fact; Starsky was my friend, too."

Hutch trembled, closed his eyes for a moment, then nodded curtly. "If that's how it has to be..."

"Yeah."

The two men left the office almost at a run.

* * *

"So the pig is dead!" Galvin crowed. "Now I can get bailed outta here."

His visitor nodded. "But it was a foul-up from the beginning. The cops will know she was behind it. That means a road sign pointing back to you."

"There're only two people who can tie me into the pig's death: Mandy Griffin and Harry Moseley." Galvin lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. "I want those two streets to be dead ends. Dead ends."

"Cost you extra."

"I've got it to spend."

Kawabe rose from his seat, gave Galvin a silent nod, and left the room. Galvin sat smiling as he smoked the cigarette down to the end.

* * *

Hutch and Huggy pulled up outside of 1023 Ocean View. "Not much to look at," Huggy noted the building. When Hutch made no comment Huggy turned to study him. Hutch's face was devoid of emotion; only his eyes held any evidence of pain. The lack of expression made Huggy shudder. "So let's go, already," he said.

The two men moved from the car, into the building. "Don't get in my way." Hutch's eyes burned briefly into Huggy's. Without waiting for an answer, he stalked up the stairs. Huggy followed silently.

They had just made it to the first landing when the shots cracked out. Hutch drew his Colt and ran up the stairs two at a time.

A sound of running footsteps drew their attention to the back of the building. A door slammed shut somewhere just ahead of them. Hutch raced forward, and got to the back stairs just as the sound of a car peeling out reached him. He stopped where he was.

"Hutch..." Huggy's tense voice drifted down the hallway.



Hutch turned back to join the black man, and found him standing in front of a room halfway back along the corridor.

"Looks like somebody beat you to Griffin." Huggy stood back to let Hutch see into the room.

Mandy Griffin's body lay sprawled on the floor, a look of surprise on her face. Blood seeped from a bullet-hole in her chest.

Hutch stepped into the room and gazed down at the body. "You did Galvin's dirty work, and he thanked you properly," was all he said.

"Well, that's that. Once you testify against Galvin, he'll get put away for a long time." Huggy looked around the dingy room. "This is one hell of a place to die in."

"It's better than a dark alley."

"Hey..." Huggy looked worriedly at Hutch. "There was nothing you could've done about that."

"Yes there was!" Hutch turned agonized eyes toward Huggy. "I should've known, trusted my instincts, my gut feelings. I knew Starsk couldn't have been on drugs. So somebody dosed him. Somebody was after him. But did I do anything to help him? Stay there and watch? No, I went back to work. I had to play big-shot, oh-so-proper cop. Overprotective? No, prophetic -- but I didn't trust it! My job, my reputation, my goddam cool capable front -- that was more important than Starsky's life!"

"Hutch--"

"I didn't protect Starsk when it mattered." Hutch's face resumed its stoney look. "I'm not going to fail him again."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Galvin wanted out. I'll oblige him."

"Uh... Don't do something you'll be sorry for."

"There's one thing I have to do." Hutch stared unseeing at Griffin's corpse. "The last thing I can do for Starsky. Galvin should have killed us both. That was his mistake, and he'll pay for it. Just like I'm paying for my mistake." He wiped the threatening tears from his eyes. "If only..." He turned abruptly and walked out.

"If only what?" Huggy followed Hutch out into the hallway, where people were coming out of their apartments to gawk.

"...this were a bad dream." Hutch hurried down the corridor. "Maybe that body's not Starsky's. It hasn't been ID'd yet, what with the ME's office being on strike. Maybe..."

"Hutch--" Huggy almost ran to keep up with the blond cop as he strode out of the building to his car. "You heard Rittenhouse. How many guys do you figure are out wandering around in hospital gowns and robes?"

Hutch pulled up short at the side of the car. "I know, Huggy. I know. It'd be too big a coincidence." He sighed and opened the car door. "Still..."

* * *

"Hey, Richie!" The blonde hooker shoved through the crowd toward the man standing near the alleyway. "Richie, it's Stella!"

The man looked up, then down quickly, as if he didn't want to be seen.

Pushing her way through the last of the crowd, Stella strolled up beside the shadowy figure. "Hey, man. Didn't you hear me? How're things hangin'? Long time, no see. You still running your stable out by the docks?"

"I...I'm afraid you're mistaken, Miss..." The man let his words die as he realized that the woman was staring at him.

"You're not Richie, are you?" She appraised his body with professional eyes. Liking what she saw, she moved closer and rubbed her thigh against his. "Look enough like him to be his brother, though." Her voice turned deep and throaty. "You doing anything special?"

The man looked down into her eyes and smiled, a little warily. He didn't like her looks, but anything was better than being alone like this. "Nope," he said.

Linking arms, the two of them moved up the street and away from the crowds. They strolled into a quieter side street, Stella taking the lead. The street grew more deserted and quiet as they progressed toward the hotel that seemed to be her destination.

They were within a few dozen yards of the door when a man came running out of the darkness and bumped into them. He fell to the ground and lay there, panting. Stella tried to pull her 'john' toward the hotel, but he seemed rooted where he stood. He frowned as if trying to remember something he should do, then disentangled himself from her grasp and stooped to help the smaller man. "Hey, you all right?" he asked.

The little man looked up, and gaped with fear and amazement. "Dave--" he gasped.

"'Dave'?!" It was the blue-eyed man's turn to look amazed. "You- you know me? Do you know me??" He grabbed the little man by the arms, just barely resisting the temptation to shake him.

"...Uh...sure. Sure I know you." The little man's expression grew slightly crafty. "But get rid of the tramp, and then we'll talk." He nodded once toward Stella.

Stella drew herself up to her full height. "I ain't no tramp!" Her eyes flashed.

'Dave' released the smaller man and turned to the woman. He hadn't really wanted her anyway, and this was a hundred times more important than a half-hour's company. "Okay, take a hike," he said.

"You-- You're dumping me for this little creep?" Stella looked as if she couldn't believe her ears. "Well, it's your time." She held out her hand. "I need cab money."

Dave glanced at her face, which had turned hard and greedy. He looked up and down the street. There were no cars of any kind in sight. "How much?" he asked her.

"Twenty."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of bills, peeled off two of them and handed them to the blonde. "Here's forty; it'll take you twice as far."

The woman sniffed, but took the money and left.

Dave turned back to the little man, a slight frown on his face. "Now, you say you know me?"

"Yeah. Your name's David." The smaller man licked his lips nervously.

"David..." He mused over the name. It didn't sound very familiar. "David what?"

The man nodded as if he understood it all. "Oh, I get you. I never saw you before, stranger. You can count on me."

Dave grabbed his arm near the wrist. "No, you don't understand!" Desperate, he decided to risk trusting the little man with his secret. "I...I don't know who I am. In fact, I can't remember anything back more than 3 hours ago."

For an instant the little man looked stunned. Then his face took on a sympathetic look, but his mind was busy checking out all the possibilities. *Harry, he exulted, Your luck has finally changed for the better! The cop don't remember nothing. Maybe I can trade him to Galvin. One cop, for me. Fair trade. ...But I gotta make sure the pig trusts me. If he gets away from me before I make the trade, I'll be dead for sure. I have to keep him away from the rest of them, especially that Hutchinson...* "Gee, that's rough." He placed his free hand on Dave's shoulder. "I'll do whatever I can...pal."

"You can tell me my name! You said it's David. David what?"

"David's all you ever told me. Said you didn't want your name know around here...seein' that you was wanted by the cops."

...Wanted by the cops... Dave swayed a little. "Wanted? For what?" His face was pale. In the half-light, he didn't see the other man smile.

"You're a paid soldier," said the little man. "A big one. Came into town to snuff a cop named Starsky." He held his breath, waiting to see if the name meant anything to the man in front of him. When Dave didn't react, he exhaled in a tiny hiss. "The cops are lookin' hard for you. It seems there was a witness when you snuffed the cop: his partner, Hutchinson. He's out for your blood. ...Hey, man. You okay?"

Dave shook himself like a sleepwalker trying to break out of a nightmare. "Yeah. I... I've got to get out of this town." He released his hold on the little man and took a step back into the shadows.

"Don't worry, I can help!" Harry insisted eagerly. "I've got connections. All I have to do is make one phone call, and we're home free."

Dave gave him a brief smile. "Thanks, uh..." His look clouded as he realized he didn't remember the man's name.

"Harry. Harry Mosley." Harry's smile lit his whole face. "Don't sweat it, man. You'd do the same for me."

* * *

Isas Kawabe picked the phone up on the first ring. "Galvin Exports." He listened quietly for a few seconds, then pressed his hand over the mouthpiece. "Mr. Galvin..."

Galvin looked up from his seat at the desk. "Yes?"

"It's Mosley." The dark man grinned toothily. "Says he has to talk to you."

Galvin took the phone. "You wanted to talk to me, Harry?" he purred into the receiver.

"Mr. Galvin," Harry squeaked, "I- I heard they let you outta jail."

"I paid the bail; they hadda release me. That's neither here nor there. What do you want, Harry?"

"You heard about that c-cop they found, out near the docks?"

"Of course. Some of The Creeper's work."

"What- what if I was to tell you it wasn't Starsky that got snuffed? What if I was to tell you Griffin made a mistake?"

"I'd have to ask you how you know that." The edge in Galvin's voice sent shivers down Harry's back.

"I...I've got the cop. I'm willing to make a fair trade: his life for mine. I don't want nothing else, just to be left alone."

"How did you happen to get this cop, Harry? I somehow don't think he'd come to you and give himself up."

"He don't know who he is! M-must've lost his memory or something. I ran into him, convinced him to trust me. Told him we were old buddies. Anyhow, he thinks the cops are after him for snuffing a cop named Starsky. I told'm that." Harry dared to gloat a little.

"How very inventive of you, Harry." Galvin's tone turned oily smooth. "I do believe you deserve something for your trouble."

"I told you, Mr. Galvin. All I want is to be left alone."

"I'm sure something can be arranged." A smirk slid across Galvin's face. "Just tell me where we can pick up the package, and you have yourself a deal."

* * *

"You're throwing your whole life away." Despite the blunt words, Dobey looked compassionately at Hutch. "It won't help Dave now. I know it hurts, but he wouldn't want you to ruin yourself like this."

Hutch said nothing.

Huggy Bear looked at the drawn face of the detective beside him, and knew that Dobey's words weren't making any difference. "Might as well give it up, Captain. I've tried to get the same message across for the last 12 hours. No such luck."

Dobey scowled. "Ken, isn't there anything that can change your mind?"

Hutch looked at Dobey through red-rimmed eyes. "Yeah. One thing."

"And that is?"

"To see Starsk come through that door."

Dobey sighed deeply. "Ken, I can't order you to testify against Galvin, but I can keep you from killing the man."

"Captain, how much am I supposed to take?" Hutch's tone was infinitely bitter. "How much do we take and keep coming back for more? A year ago a psycho almost killed Starsky in an alley, and we came back for more. He was shot, knifed, poisoned, and each time we came back for more. Well, it's all over. I can't do it again, not alone. I'm just not going to let them get away with it this time. I'm not going to play by the rules. If I hadn't been so busy minding the rules, I might have saved him. This is the last thing I can do for him, and it doesn't matter how long it takes. So do your damndest, Captain. Sooner or later, I'll get Galvin. One way or another."

The ringing of the phone saved Dobey from replying. "Dobey," he said curtly. He listened for a few minutes, made some notes, then looked at Hutch. "Are you still a cop?"

Hutch laughed humorlessly. "For the time being. What's up?"

"I've had a tail on Galvin ever since he was released this morning."

Hutch snapped to attention.

"He and some of his boys just left the exporting company, looking like they were loaded for bear."

"Where's he heading?" The note in Hutch's voice made the hair lift on the other two men's arms.

"Toward the docks." Dobey searched Hutch's face. "I want you along on this. It could be big. There's been some talk of a large buy coming down, and this could be it. I want to nab not only Galvin, but whoever else is involved."

Hutch nodded. "I'll play along, Captain. I'll help you get the others, but Galvin is mine."

"Hutch..."

"Don't worry, Captain; I'll go by your rule-book, this time. But I'm still going to get Galvin." Hutch's eyes glinted dangerously. "And it won't matter where he is." He got to his feet. "Gentlemen?" He led the way to the door.

* * *

Harry looked nervously over his shoulder. He wished that Galvin hadn't wanted him to wait with the cop. He glanced at Starsky. The cop seemed nervous; there was something haunted, almost panicky, about his eyes. He flinched at every sound, as if everything scared him. Harry smiled to himself. *Shouldn't be too much longer. Then you won't have to worry about anything else -- ever!* He looked into the street from the alley entrance, then glanced at his watch. *Almost 3 o'clock. What's holding them up? Don't know how much longer I can keep him here.*

Starsky cleared his throat behind the tense little man's back. Harry started and jumped halfway out into the street. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

Harry managed a weak smile. "No sweat, man. Guess we're both wired." He slipped back into the alley. "So what gives?"

"That's what I'm wondering. It's been, what, 30 minutes since you made your call? So where are these guys you've been telling me about?"

"Hang loose, man. They'll be here; you just have to give them some time. It's not like they can just roar up in a cloud of dust. You don't want the whole world to know you're here, now do you?"

Mutely, Starsky shook his head.

"So, relax. They'll be here."

Almost as if on cue, a car pulled up across the street from the alley where the two men were hiding. Galvin and his two top boys got out and looked around.

Starsky nodded toward the three. "That them?"

"Yeah!" Harry stood up to call to them.

One of Galvin's hoods, a thin dark man, spotted Harry. He promptly drew his gun and fired at him.

Starsky grabbed Harry and pulled him down as the bullet ricocheted off the building behind them. "Nice friends you have!" He pulled Harry after him and ran off up the alley, ducking and dodging among the garbage cans.

The three hoods started to run after their quarry, but stopped short as a familiar noise filled the air. Police cars roared onto the block from all directions, sirens shrilling.

Kawabe lost his head and began firing at anything that moved. The police returned his fire. Galvin and Brannon drew their weapons, dropped down behind the car and fired at the nearest black-and-white.

That proved to be a mistake. The trigger-happy Kawabe, having no cover, caught three slugs at once and dropped like a log. Galvin's continued fire won him the concerted attention of a half-dozen police guns. Galvin's size was against him, for once; he was too big to hide completely behind the car's fender. A bullet caught him in the shoulder and knocked him down. Swearing, he tried to shoot from the ground. One lucky shot hit a cop, throwing him backward.

A concentrated storm of return fire stitched Galvin from throat to beltline.

Brannon, panicked, tried to run up the alley. Police fire brought him down before he'd gone ten feet.

Dobey, Hutch and Huggy Bear pulled up in Hutch's car just as the wounded man threw his gun away and began howling for help.

"What's going on here?" Dobby bellowed. "Report!"

Hutch surveyed the scene, taking in every detail: the dead gunman in the middle of the street, the wounded one screaming for a doctor as the uniformed cops slapped the cuffs on him, the dead officer being covered with a blanket, and Galvin lying dead in a lake of blood beside the car.

Robbed even of vengeance. Hutch let out his breath in a long hiss between his teeth.

"We followed Galvin as ordered," the senior man was saying to the Captain.

"They pulled up here and got out of the car. Suddenly, that one--" He pointed to Kawabe. "--Pulled his gun and started firing on two men in the alley. I couldn't see who they were." He turned to some of the other officers. "Did any of you see who it was in the alley?"

One of the younger cops raised his hand. "I did. I've seen the smaller man around, on and off. His name's Harry Mosley. He lives over on Piedmont Avenue, I think. Slimey little weasel. Makes his living doing odd jobs."

Huggy did a double-take. "You say Mosley? He's the dude that applied for a job at my bar, day before yesterday. Worked one night, then cut out."

"This is getting interesting." Dobey nodded at the young cop. "Continue."

"I guess Sergeant Starsky was arresting him, or something -- only reason I can think of for the two of them to be together."

"What?!" Hutch grabbed the young cop by the arm. "What did you say?"

"I thought Starsky was arresting him." The man looked at Hutch in surprise.

"Sergeant David Starsky?" Hutch pronounced each word carefully.

"Sure. He's the only Starsky I know. Say, aren't you his partner?"

Ignoring the question, Hutch turned and ran into the alley. He followed it to the end, but found nothing. He returned to find Dobey and Huggy waiting for him.

"Any luck?" Dobey questioned.

"Nothing." Hutch looked around for the policeman. "Where's that guy who saw Starsky? What street did he say Mosley lived at?"

"Piedmont Avenue." Huggy looked thoughtful. "But if Starsky's alive, why hasn't he contacted any of us? And why would he be hanging out with a cat like Mosley?"

"When I find him, I'll ask him."

"Ken..." Dobey's quiet tone made the other two look in his direction. "Don't get your hopes up too high. It might not be Dave."

"But it might be. It just might be!"

* * *

In the twilight Harry glowered at Starsky's back. They'd been running and hiding for almost five hours. He was exhausted beyond terror, beyond clear thought. Nothing remained but misery and resentment. *You bastard, it's all your fault. I'd have been okay if it hadn't been for you...* Hate glared out of Harry's eyes as he picked his way through the debris of another alley. *It's just like my old man said. You gotta look out for yourself. Aint anybody else gonna do it for you...* He stumbled over something in the shadows: a torn teddy bear, of all things. *Just garbage now. All garbage. They say Mom ran off with the garbageman...*

"You okay, Harry?" Starsky called over his shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just fine."

Starsky nodded acknowledgement and picked his way forward.

Sure, I'm just fine! I'll get even with you... Harry's vision wavered. The form in front of him seemed to change, grow bigger. When the man stopped and turned around, Harry could see his face. *Of course! Why didn't I see it before?*

"Where to now, Harry?" The man looked left, then right.

"The house. They'll never find us once we get inside."

"The house?" Starsky looked questioningly at Harry. "What house?"

"Oh, I forgot you can't remember anything. Well, your first glimpse of the house should bring it all back."

Something about Harry's grin sent shivers over Starsky.

"You cold?"

"No." Starsky shook his head, wincing at the familiar pain. "Don't mind me. Guess I'm just jumpy." *That's putting it mildly. Hell, the whole world's after me!*

"That's okay. You got ever reason to be nervous." Harry turned and moved off into the twilight.

Starsky hesitated for a second, then shrugged and followed him. There was, after all, nowhere else to go.

* * *

Hutch looked out into the gathering dark. *How can anybody in this day and age live in this country without leaving some kind of record?* He shook his head in disgust. *Harry Mosley: no record of birth, no social security number, no driver's license, no tax record, no employment record, no, no, no...* He slammed his hand against the steering wheel. *Damn! Where are you, Mosley? All that officer could remember was "somewhere on Piedmont" -- maybe! ...If you're out there, I'll find you. If it takes me the rest of my life, I'll find you.*

He carefully kept his mind off Starsky.

* * *

The house was a decaying Victorian mansion, straight out of a gothic horror novel. Taller than any of the nearby buildings, and the last residential house on the block, it rose out of its surroundings like a lighthouse on a cliff. It was set back away from the street, in a lot enclosed by a wrought-iron picket fence. The grass, weeds and other plants in the yard had grown up into a virtual jungle. The whole lot looked like someone's Halloween card, or a Charles Addams cartoon.

Harry turned to Starsky with an expectant look on his face. "Well?"

"It's...it's different." Starsky gave a sick smile. *Why does everything have to be so scary and ugly? I couldn't have always lived like this! I don't think I could stand it...*

Harry shrugged and started toward the building. "No one will find us once

we're inside. Won't have to worry about anybody ever finding you."

Starsky shivered again. *Get hold of yourself. It's just a big old neglected house. A hideout.* He glanced at Harry's retreating figure, then hurried to catch up. *Harry's the only friend you've got in this town, maybe in the whole world. He's done everything he could to keep you alive. It's not his fault you're in trouble. You killed that cop...* He shook his head in self-disgust, ignoring the pain. *I don't know why I killed a cop, but it must've been for something big. I...I don't believe I could kill for just money...* He gave a small, bitter laugh. *Let's us be truthful, David; you just don't want to believe it. You don't even know your own mind. ...Well, that other cop-- What did Harry say his name was? Oh yeah, Hutchinson. He's got a big reason to want me dead. No wonder Harry's friends sold us out. From what Harry said, I wouldn't want to cross him either. Well, once I'm out of this town I'll be safe ...maybe. Where should I go? One place would be just like another unless... until I get my memory back. Maybe New York?*

He was so deep in his thoughts that he didn't notice Harry stopping in front of the gate to the fence, and he walked right into the smaller man. "Uh, sorry." He gave a half-smile. Harry didn't say anything. In the deepening darkness it was impossible to see his face. "How long do we stay here?" Starsky asked, nodding toward the house. He still felt shakey.

"Only for a little while." Harry's voice held a quality that Starsky couldn't place. "Then I'll help you get far, far away. Nobody will ever find you again. That I can promise you." He giggled.

Starsky tried to smile, but his whole face felt frozen. He didn't want to go in there. The house scared him. Harry's strangeness scared him. But then, the dark, hostile world out here scared him too. "Ah, okay, Harry." He looked from the darkened form beside him to the gloomy shape of the house. "I guess we might as well go in. Right?" *What choice have I got?*

Harry opened the gate and waved Starsky through it, into the deep weeds. Starsky jumped as Harry slammed the gate shut behind him. "Sorry..." The word seemed to be slightly mocking.

The two men moved silently up to the front door. Harry reached up over the door-frame for the key hidden there.

Starsky rubbed his forehead. "You always keep your key over the door like that?" For a minute he seemed to be standing in front of a different door. It was a place he could almost make out, a familiar place, someplace he was sure he'd been many times before.

Harry glanced over his right shoulder at Starsky. "Sure, I always keep my key up there. You're the one who taught me that trick."

The image of the other door evaporated. "Guess that's why it seems so familiar... I almost had something, but now it's gone."

Harry turned back to the door, looking strangely relieved. As it swung open on squeaky hinges he ushered Starsky into the dark hallway. "I'll show you where you can hide until it's safe."

Starsky tried a switch beside the front door. "Any lights in the place?"

"Electric company turned them off a few months back." Harry struck a match and lit a candle that sat on a nearby table. "But this is better. Much better." His face seemed to shimmer and change in the candlelight. "Come on. It's this way." He moved quietly toward the staircase at the back of the hall.

Images of ghosts, goblins, and things that went bump in the night played around the edges of Starsky's mind, never quite near enough for him to recognize them, just enough to start him shivering again. He looked around the hallway one last time, and then followed Harry up the stairs.

* * *

"Zebra Three. Come in, Zebra Three," the radio crackled to life as Hutch waited at a red light.

"This is Zebra Three."

"Stand by for patch-through from Captain Dobey." The radio went silent for a few seconds. The sound of a car horn behind him made Hutch glance first into the rear-view mirror, then to the traffic signal, which had turned green.

"Hutchinson--" Dobey's voice came over the radio as Hutch removed his foot from the brake.

Hutch pulled the car over to the side and parked. "What have you got?" He noticed that his hands were shaking. His self-control was slipping badly.

"No record of Harry Mosley from Sacramento or the Feds."

"There's got to be some record of him someplace! R&I couldn't come up with anything, and now you tell me that nobody else has anything on him? What's going on? What the hell is everybody doing? Somebody must know something!" He realized he was shouting into the microphone.

"Ken..." Dobey's tone was extremely worried.

With difficulty, Hutch got control of himself. "Have you checked the addresses in the area with the property-tax records?"

"Had to go through the Mayor's office, but I got the records we needed. There were only three Mosleys on the list that live on Piedmont. Number 1: Lisette Radinka Mosley, 2734 Piedmont; she's lived at that address for three years, a widow with one child, a son, age 2½. Number 2: Stephen Mosley, 5729 Piedmont, been there 12 years. He's married, with three kids. The DMV photo shows him to be a nordic type. He's listed as over 6 feet tall."

"Damn!" Hutch bit his lower lip. "You said there were three Mosleys. So what about number 3?"

"Number 3 is a man named Gus Mosley. He's over 75 years old." Dobey's voice sounded defeated.

"What's his address?" Hutch asked automatically, just going through the required motions. It seemed as if everything was conspiring to keep him from finding Harry Mosley.

"Ken," Dobey cleared his throat. "I'm sending back-up teams to each of them."

"The address." There was a note of warning in Hutch's tone.

"256 Piedmont," Dobey growled back over the radio. "It's in the business district."

"I'm only a few blocks away. I'll make that my first stop."

"Ken, be careful." Dobey didn't add that Starsky might not be alive, that all this might be for nothing.

"Zebra Three, out." Hutch switched off the microphone. Carefully keeping his mind blank, he pulled his car back into traffic.

* * *

Starsky looked around apprehensively. He'd followed Harry up three flights of stairs and into a back bedroom, then stood back and watched as Harry pushed against one of the walls. When it slid back to reveal a secret passageway, Starsky wasn't surprised. "How far does that go?"

"The whole house is honeycombed with passageways. This one leads to a room on the next floor. It's the only way into the room from this part of the house. All the other exits were sealed off, remember?" Harry paused. "Oh, that's right. You don't remember nothing."

Again Starsky looked into the gloom of the passageway. "In there?" He didn't like this. He didn't like having to trust Harry.

"That's where you have to go, in case the cops show up -- especially that Hutchinson. He'd as soon shoot you as look at you." Harry slid into the passage. "That cannon he carries makes quite a hole, you know."

The picture of a man formed in Starsky's mind: about his height, blond, with blue eyes -- and in his hand he carried a Colt .357 Magnum revolver. "Ah, Harry, do you know a man about my size, blond, blue-eyed?"

"Yeah." Harry's eyes shifted for a second. "That's Hutchinson. Why? I thought you couldn't remember anything."

The image grew; it was as if he could reach out and touch the man. It seemed that Hutchinson wanted to say something to him, but he couldn't make out quite what it was. "I...just have a feeling that I know him."

"Course you know him." Harry smiled quickly. "You followed him and his partner around for almost two weeks before you iced Starsky."

Starsky slammed his hand into the wall. "Then why don't I get a picture of this Starsky?"

"You asking me? I aint no shrink."

Starsky grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, that's what I need, all right; a shrink. Lead on, Fearless Leader." He followed Harry into the bowels of the house.

* * *

Hutch pulled his car to a stop across the street from the old dark house. Removing the keys, he took a few minutes to study the place. *Nobody home...* He rubbed his eyes with his fingers, swore, took a deep breath to steady himself, and started to put the key back into the lock. He glanced up at the house for a final check--

--and was startled to see a glimpse of a soft, wavering light.

What the hell? He stepped away from the car and hurried across the street to the house. Almost blew that one. Starsk, where the hell are you? Am I so far gone that I miss the obvious? What's going on? Why haven't you contacted me? What were you doing with that scum Mosley? Damn, I should've talked more to that young cop! Never should've let Dobey talk me out of it. I could've gotten something more from him! He must know more than he told Dobey. Somebody's got to know something!

He placed a trembling hand on the gate. Calm down, Hutchinson. Easy, boy. This is something you've done before. Just knock on the door and question the people inside. It'll be easy. You've done it before, nothing to get excited about... He gave a nervous laugh. "No, nothing to be upset about. It's only Starsky's life." He bit his lower lip until he thought he could taste blood. Only Starsky's life. Oh god! Admit it, damn you -- that's the most important thing in the world, and you never told him!

He opened the gate slowly. The house crouched before him like something alive and watchful. He pulled his gun from its holster and checked it. The whole world seemed as empty as he felt; there was no sound anywhere, none of the usual night noise that one heard even in the city. The only sound was his own heart pounding in his ears. What's going on here? The last time it was this quiet was at Pine Lake... He put that thought away from him, walked up to the front steps and slowly moved up them. They creaked softly under his weight. Damn noise! For some reason that he couldn't explain, Hutch knew something was very wrong here -- and this time he would trust his feelings.

In three quick steps he made it across the porch to the door. He looked carefully around the outside of the building. Nothing moved. He shook his head slowly, beginning to distrust himself again. So what the hell did you expect? You saw a light, maybe, and you react like somebody's waiting to kill you. Maybe it's time to quit. Starsk and I'll move on to something else. Just as soon as I find him. Just as soon...

He set his left hand on the doorknob, his right clutching his Colt. This is irrational, his old defenses scolded him. I don't even know that this is the right place. I could be walking in on a family at prayers, or something equally innocent... His gut-feeling of danger kept the gun in his hand. The door was unlocked, and as he pushed it inward it swung on loudly protesting hinges. He winced at the racket.

Hutch glanced around the gloomy interior, his eyes finally resting on the light-switch beside the door. He tried it, but the room remained dark. No luck. Either the bulb's burned out or the electricity's off. Slowly, he edged into the dark house. Here goes nothing. "Hello! Anybody home?" he called as loudly as possible. The echo of his voice was his only answer. Time to bluff. "Okay. Look, I know you're in here, so why not save us all a lot of trouble, and show yourself?"

The faint sound of something falling on one of the upper floors reached his ears.

Hutch ran up the stairs two at a time, and paused at the next floor. "Look, I'm not going to hurt you," he called. "I just want to talk to you."

No response came.

"I'm not giving up." Hutch stalked toward one of the rooms, planning to search every one of them, if necessary. "I'll stay here until I get to talk to you, so you might as well come out now."

He'd almost gone through the door to the room when a feeling of being watched made him look over his shoulder. He glimpsed a small dark shadow moving up the stairs opposite him.

Hutch turned and ran up the stairs after the shadow. "Police! Freeze!" he yelled after the dark shape. The words only made the shadow run faster.

He raced up two more flights of stairs trying to catch up, but the smaller form seemed always two jumps ahead of him. He cleared the last step only in time to see the shadow flit into a room nearby.

Panting, Hutch moved warily to the door. He reached over, yanked it open -- and stepped into a completely empty room.

Slowly, he brought his gun down. *This is impossible! Where the hell did he go?* Hutch slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and brought out a book of matches. Lighting one, he carefully looked around the room.

Over by one corner he noticed a scrap of fabric that hung on the wall, about a third of the way up. He went over to it to give it a better look. The first match burned down to his fingers. He paused to light another one, and bent down to look closer.

The fabric was a piece of somebody's coat. It had caught on the edge of a sliding door that would have been invisible otherwise.

So that's how he got out of here! Hutch pushed at the section of wall, and it moved aside to expose a dark opening behind it. "Look, I only want to talk to you," he called into the darkness. "I'm the police. My name's Hutchinson, and I want to talk to you about my partner, Starsky."

He was halted by a voice from the dark ahead of him. "Listen, I'll give myself up, but Harry has to go free. He didn't do anything. Deal?"

Starsky!! Hutch was shocked speechless.

"Is it a deal or not?" the familiar voice insisted.

"I told you he'd come looking." Another, nasal, voice came echoing down the passageway. "He can't afford to let me go. You should know that as well as I do!"

Hutch shook his head, trying to make sense of this. *Starsky?!*

"Come on, Dave. I know another way out."

The sound of feet scrambling off down the passage brought Hutch back to the situation. "Starsky!" he yelled after his fleeing partner. "Starsk, it's Hutch!"

"Save it, cop." Harry's audible sneer floated back to him. "Dave aint gonna buy no bill of goods from The Man, so try your shit on somebody else."

Again the sound of running footsteps reached Hutch's ears. They receded off to the right. With no further hesitation, Hutch plunged into the passageway and followed.

It was dusty in there, and unlit. Hutch was forced to rely on matches, and his supply dwindled fast. "Starsky," he called, "Hey, man, it's Hutch. What's going on? Don't run off. It's me, Babe; it's your partner!"

"Stop that." Starsky's voice, somewhere ahead of him, sounded impossibly weary. "Stop trying to snow me. I can't... Look, just because you were his partner... Why the hell should that mean anything to me? Be cool, baby. Hang loose."

His partner? What the hell's going on? You act like you don't know me! The thought stopped Hutch in his tracks. "Starsky, don't you know me?! ...Look, all I want to do is talk. That's all, Babe. Just talk." He listened for a reply, but heard only a door opening somewhere near. He hurried toward the sound.

Hutch was down to his last match by the time he reached the door. Cautiously, he pulled it open. The night sky loomed overhead.

He moved out onto the roof, carefully looking all around him. "Starsky?" he called once more. "Hey man, you're my partner. You're Dave Starsky. Don't you remember?"

A faint sound, something like a groan, drew his attention to one of the many chimneys on the roof. "Starsk?" he almost whispered.

Starsky stood up slowly, hands held high. His face was haggard, defeated, slack with despair. "Okay," he said, "You've got me. I'll go with you. Just leave Harry out of this. Okay?"

"Out of what, Starsk?" Hutch stared, bewildered, at his partner.

Then a movement to Starsky's right drew his attention.

Harry Mosley slid toward the back of the unsuspecting man, carrying a long 2-by-4 timber. He raised it high, clearly meaning to bring it down on the dark curly head in front of him.

"Starsky!" Hutch screamed, bringing up the Colt with both hands, aiming at Mosley. *Too close!* "Look out!"

Hutch's warning made Starsky turn. Mosley missed the taller man's head and hit him on the left shoulder. The force of the blow sent Starsky to his knees. His face blanched, and a guttural cry broke from him. He stared up at Harry in shock.

"Why can't you stay dead, Pop?" Harry screeched, oblivious to everything but his personal demon. "I can kill you and kill you, but you still keep coming back! I told you I'd never let you hurt me again. I told you! When you put that belt around my arms, I told you it'd be the last time. I meant it, Pop! Maybe this time you'll stay dead!" He raised the board high over his head.

Hutch fired.

The bludgeon was on its downward swing as the first bullet slammed into Harry's chest. The force of it threw him to the edge of the roof. The second shot carried him over it.

Hutch lowered his pistol, shaking. *Was that second shot necessary?* he wondered idly. *He was already down. But I wanted him gone. Gone...*

Starsky stared toward the space where Harry had stood. He didn't turn when Hutch moved to his side.

"Hey, you all right?" Hutch laid a hand on Starsky's right arm.

Starsky didn't react. He gazed off into space, his vision locked.

"Starsk?" Hutch gripped the arm tighter.

The sound of approaching sirens split the night. Hutch pulled Starsky up to face him, ignoring everything else. The man was as limp as an abandoned puppet. "Starsk..." Hutch looked into his partner's withdrawn eyes, and shuddered. Starsky had shut off all sensory inputs. He saw, heard and felt nothing.

* * *

Hutch kept up a running monologue all the way to the hospital in the ambulance. Starsky lay on a gurney, staring up at the roof of the vehicle, not acknowledging that the other man was even there.

At the hospital Hutch tried to go into the emergency room with his friend, but was repeatedly held back by a nurse. Having had just about all that he could take, he finally shoved her aside and burst into the room.

The doctor looked up from examining Starsky, frowning. "Yes?"

"Police. I'm his partner. What's wrong with him?"

"Your friend is catatonic."

"...What?"

"He sustained quite a shock. I can only guess at what happened, but whatever it was compounded the original problem..."

"What problem?"

"The bruises indicate that he was severely beaten at least 12 hours before he was brought here." The doctor frowned again. "You told the attendants that he didn't appear to know you? Yes. Probable concussion and amnesia. Heaven knows what he'd been told by the man that finally attacked him. That change from friend to attacker seems to have been the last straw, a betrayal he couldn't accept. So, he just...shut down. Hopefully, he'll snap out of it soon. However..." The man's voice trailed off.

Hutch turned to look at the still form of his partner. Starsky lay as he had in the ambulance, staring up at the ceiling, not moving.

Hutch felt a hand placed on his shoulder. He didn't turn around. "Yeah?" he asked listlessly.

"Ken, we have to let them move Dave into another room."

Dobey. When did he come in? Hutch let the Captain pull him from the emergency room. Silently he moved to a chair and sat down.

The older man studied him with concern. "Mosley was The Creeper," he said.

Hutch didn't react, only kept his eyes glued to the door of the emergency room, waiting for news, for Starsky.

"We found three more bodies in the basement that hint at quite a story," the

Captain went on. "There was an elderly man, skull crushed and arms belted up like all the rest of The Creeper's victims -- except that he'd been down there a lot longer than the earliest of The Creeper killings. Underneath him we found the remains of a woman and a man in a sanitation-worker's uniform. Their skulls had been crushed too, but their arms weren't tied. They'd been dead even longer -- 30 years, at least. The lab-team's still going over the whole house, but so far those are the only bodies."

"...he's just got to make it..." Hutch whispered.

Dobey placed a hand under Hutch's arm, intending to herd him out of the hospital, but Hutch pulled away from his grasp. "Ken, you can't do anything here," Dobey insisted. "The doctor will call you if there's any change."

"No. That's what they said last time. This time I'm staying." Hutch's look warned that there would be no way to argue him around.

The door to the emergency room opened and the orderlies pushed out Starsky's gurney. The doctor joined the two policemen. "I don't think there'll be any change tonight," he reported. "I'll call you if anything comes up."

"I'm staying here with him." Hutch got up, following the gurney with his eyes.

"I don't think--" the doctor started, but was stopped by a look from Dobey.

"He has to be with his partner, Doctor. Would his presence do Starsky any harm?"

The doctor looked at Hutch's tense form, then toward the still body lying on the gurney. "No, I suppose not... Very well, he can stay -- but he'll have to promise to keep out of the way."

Hutch nodded quickly. He'd promise anything. Without a word he went to his partner's side to await the elevator.

Dobey looked from the two men to the doctor. "What do you think?" he whispered.

The doctor looked grim. "He'll live, if that's what you mean. Will he ever come out of this? I don't know. He could wake up tomorrow, or he could be like that forever. We'll watch him very closely. If he doesn't snap out of it soon, we'll just have to ship him over to Cabrillo. They have better facilities to handle this sort of thing."

* * *

The days seemed to merge into one, and the nights were endless. Hutch sat by Starsky's bedside, talking to him continuously. He reconstructed the past, telling their assorted adventures together. He told of the good times, girlfriends, moments and places where they had been happy. Most of all, he talked about his feelings -- the things he'd been afraid to admit before, saying them now, finally. He took occasional naps, but never for long or very often.

Most of Starsky's friends came at least once to visit. Many, such as Dobey and his wife Edith, and Huggy Bear, had come more than once. Hutch paid little attention to any of them. His whole mind was concentrated on his best friend.

The dark-haired man never moved or spoke.



The morning of the fifth day, the Dobeys finally got Hutch to leave Starsky's bedside and go down to the cafeteria. Edith convinced him that he had to take a break or he wouldn't have any reserves when Starsky would need him.

They'd been downstairs no more than 15 minutes when Hutch grew impatient and headed back up to Starsky's room, unable to bear being away for one second more. Dobey shrugged to his wife, and the two of them followed.

The Dobeys reached the room only to collide with Hutch as he came charging back out of the door. "He's gone!" Hutch looked wildly around, face deadly pale.

"What?" Dobey stared at him.

A nurse came out of another room. Hutch reached out and grabbed her by the arms. "Where is he?" he roared at her.

"S-sir?" She looked to the Dobeys for help.

"David Starsky! That's his room over there. He's not in it. Where is he, damn you?" Hutch shook her.

"They- they're moving him to- to Cabrillo, and--"

Hutch didn't wait for her to finish. He dropped her arms and took off toward the staff elevators with the Dobeys in hot pursuit.

They reached the ground floor just as the next elevator's doors slid open. Sure enough, there were two attendants pushing a gurney with a familiar body on it.

"Halt!" Hutch yelled in his most official voice. "Stay right where you are!"

The two orderlies looked at him in surprise. Then they looked at each other. The larger of the two shrugged and started to push the gurney out of the elevator.

Hutch jumped forward and grabbed the man by the arm. "I said stop!"

"Look, buddy, we was told to move this stiff to an ambulance, and we're going to do just that." The muscular man pushed Hutch aside.

Hutch reached for his gun.

Stop this, fast. Dobey pushed between them. "Who gave that order?" he bel-
lowed.

"I don't know, and I don't care." The orderly looked impatient and peeved. "They don't pay us to ask lotsa questions."

"Let's see some legal proof," Dobey snapped, "Or you can be charged with Abduction."

The attendant sighed. "Look, guys, I got a job to do just like everybody else, so just let me get to it. Okay?"

Hutch pulled out his badge. "I'm a cop," he explained.

The smaller orderly wasn't impressed. "And I'm Stonewall Jackson. C'mon, get outta the way."

"I don't care who you are--" the other orderly started.

His voice was cut off suddenly as Hutch hit him in the stomach.

The other attendant jumped away in sudden fright. Dobey yelled at Hutch. Edith simply screeched.

All of them momentarily forgot about Starsky.

* * *

The noise was coming nearer. He couldn't quite make out what it was, but it scared him. He wanted to cry out, turn away, run, but his body wouldn't obey him. The noise, whatever it was, rose to a roar. He felt his muscles contract. Fear rose up in him like a physical thing. He could make out the sounds now: voices. All around him, the sound of loud and angry voices. He trembled.

Then he saw a shape to his right. Harry. His mind shied away from the name. His body relaxed suddenly, became limp as a rag doll.

"David."

He looked up. The shape took on the form of a man that he felt he should know. The little man was smiling and nodding at him.

"David!"

His attention was drawn to another man standing to his left. This one was familiar too, as well as tall and blond.

He looked from one to the other. Both of them seemed to know him, to want to talk to him, but he didn't know which way to go and he knew there was great danger here. He felt a tug at his wrists, and was surprised to find two pieces of rope attached to them. Each man held the end of one rope. They began to pull him away from each other with all their strength. "David!" each man called to him. He felt as if he were splitting in two.

Suddenly the ropes snapped, and he was free. He tried to run, but everywhere he turned one or the other of the men was there.

The smaller man held a club, and raised it high over his head. "I'm your friend, Dave," he said, and swung.

As the club fell at him, he turned and ran in the opposite direction. The blow barely missed him.

Then the tall man was in front of him. "I'm your friend..." He held a gun, and as he spoke he pulled the trigger.

The bullet seemed to fly toward him in slow motion, but he couldn't move. All three of them watched as the bullet sailed slowly toward its intended prey.

* * *

"NO!!!"

Starsky sat bolt upright on the gurney.

The five people who'd been fighting over him stopped in frozen surprise. He glared at them, contemplating each in turn.

Hutch was the first to react. "Starsk, you're awake!"

Starsky looked at him without answering. He slipped his feet over the edge

of the gurney, trying to get off of it and onto his feet.

"Hey, Babe, take it easy." Hutch's grin went from ear to ear. He put out a hand to steady his partner. "How're you feeling."

"Lousy." Starsky slipped out of Hutch's grip. "What's going on? Where am I? Who are all these people?" He rubbed his head tiredly. "Who are you?" He gave a half smile. "For that matter, who the hell am I?"

* * * * *

(TO BE CONTINUED)



Walls



Delaineh

Sometimes I yearn
for the safety of a brick wall.
The very real kind.

You know: bricks and mortar.
The kind that stop bullets.
Castles and forts
were made out of the stuff.

How many, many times have I wished
to build such a wall
around...
Where nobody, nothing
could hurt you.

I wouldn't even allow a drawbridge.

Silly.
Stupid.
Selfish.

No, I'd never allow it to be built.

Not around you, little buddy.
As selfish as that idea is,

I'm too selfish
to do something that would take you
away from me.
Even if I knew you'd be there --
behind the wall,
safe.

And yet, here I sit
behind this glass,
this wall --
watching you,
knowing that at any time
you can go behind a wall
without a drawbridge --
where I can't see you,
can't touch you,
can't tell you how much...
The one place where nobody, nothing,
could ever hurt you again.

Don't die, Starsk.
I don't always know what I want,
but deep down I know
I don't want any walls between us.



Jive Talking

You don't understand, my man,
You simply do not understand
Why I do what I do.
Why should you? No one else does.
Oh yes, I'm high, but when love and pain
Fly together, it's a heavy combination.
I'm not ashamed; let's have a toast to
My sweet love.
The way I seem, it's just part of my act --
A silly game of C.Y.A. -- Cover Your Ass.
Your words hurt, but that will pass;
But not the pain. So don't ever say I'm mean.
It's only smoke, a super-cool façade, a bluff,
A guise. It hides my heart from too-blue eyes.
Tell the truth? Don't be absurd! Sit a while
...play my hand and think about the man
Who cages me with crooked grins.
I tell my truth -- nobody wins.
Why the sudden sad surprise, the pity
Curving in your eyes? My silence buys me love
...and hope.
And here he comes, so set me up another round
And paste a smile across your face before he asks
Why you're so grim.
Do you know, my somber friend, how mean I'd be
If not for him?
Before you hang him out to dry, remember how
He makes me laugh. Think who holds me
When I cry.
The slender hands that play with toys often hold
My life secure.
That's enough for any man.
And yet I lust for him, you get my drift?
His body pressed against my own...
But more than that,
The bottom line:
I need his love, and now it's mine.
I can't risk that on a dream. I can't.
Please understand! I'd rather bleed and blow my
Smoke than mar his childlike innocence.
Just to try and have my hope...
Look how he makes his way to me.
He says hello, he does the nods, but
All the while he comes to me.
You keep your truth...and keep mine too.
Don't think to give my heart away.
Just let me love him
...in my way.

-- Annette Hall

Over the Line

Harriet Stallings

"I told ya."

Hutch angled down into the seat cushion, hunching shoulders and bracing knees while the Torino did a Donut in the street. Grunting at the car's poor performance, to say nothing of Starsky's driving, he added: "It's the damned motor-mounts. Look, we can't go shoving the front end down some side street without risking us and everybody around us."

Starsky, unable to decide what in the hell was wrong with the Torino's front end (it was wallowing like a pregnant sow), had already decided that Hutch didn't know what he was talking about. Hutch never knew about this car, and didn't want to get dirty finding out anything, either. Starsky formed his retort around a mouthfull of corn-chips, but the radio beat him to the draw.

Call-to-assist. Interrupted robbery. Suspects fleeing, auto.

In 30 seconds the transformation was complete: stuffing the unfinished bag of corn-chips under the seat, Starsky one-handed the wheel and grabbed the bubble-light out of Hutch's hand. Slapping the light on the outside roof, he reversed directions and mind-set. Adrenalin charged his system like electricity; he spared no glance from the road to Hutch when the soft drawl of the dispatcher added to the terse report: "Officer down."

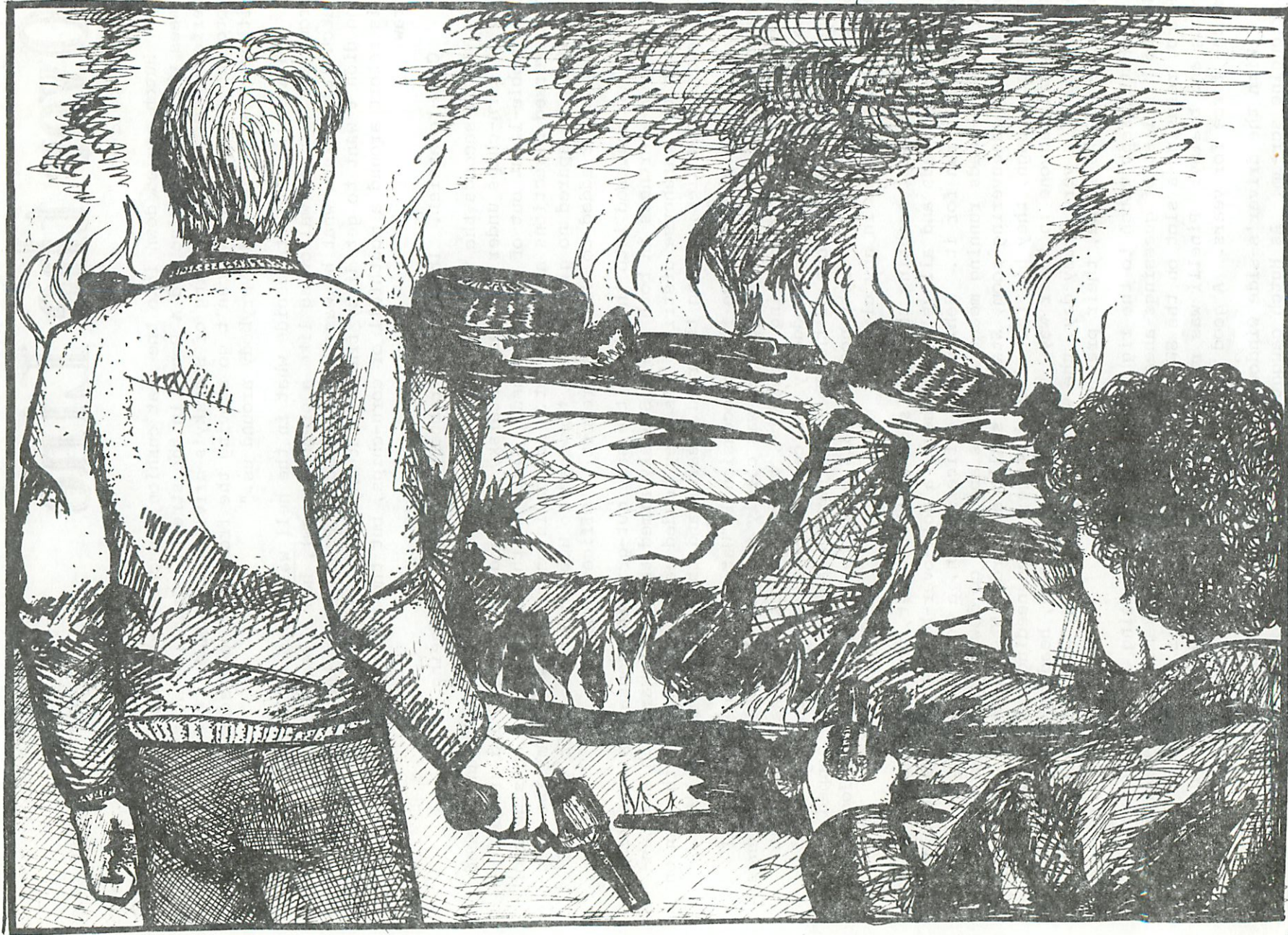
Hutch muttered into the mike, the same gut-grinding sensation competing with hyper-alertness in both men. Starsky aimed the car toward 5th and Central, in the warehouse district. As they headed east the glint of the sun on the windshield died, making the road clearer and the driver relax a little.

Hutch was silent, save for an occasional "Watch it", as per his usual reaction to an adrenalin-surge. He was calmly sorting through his experience, fitting facts and remembering screw-ups, trying to outguess whatever might greet them at the scene. Suddenly police cruiser 313 slid through the red light and pulled in front of the Torino. Hutch reached over and tapped Starsky's shoulder. Starsky nodded. 313 would be T.D. Levison and Joe Pinelli. Good backup in any clinch.

Starsky kept scouting the left side of the street, the oncoming traffic, the side of roads and alleys. Somewhere, a gold-over-black '64 Ford Galaxie was making a run for it. Behind it, officers down, a botched drugstore heist and two hop-heads running meant hell was about to go down. Swinging wide, giving 313 maneuvering room, Starsky swallowed hard. When someone needed the stuff bad enough, they hit that damned store; when needing and not getting, they'd kill anyone in their way. Heading west on 7th, heading into the late afternoon of a very lousy day, the world died; Starsky and Hutch existed on one side of the fence, their prey on the other.

Hutch kept watch to the right. Thoughts upon seeing 313 before him added to his list of guessings-ahead. Pinelli was a marksman, sent down from Metro, refusing a slot on the SWAT team. T.D. was a real clam-mouth, quiet, young and brainy. Pinelli was riding shotgun; T.D. drove as if he'd been on the force for years. A good team, all around.

With the driver's-side window open, both cops could hear 313's Interceptor engine scream. As Hutch caught the G-drag of slowdown and acceleration,



he put a hand to the dash without bothering to look over and see what Starsky intended. The wheels screamed, then slid, dragging the car sideways into the parking lot (Starsky always needed at least a block to turn the damned car, anyway), then shot back out the entrance.

313 was just now past its taillights into a blind alley, having spotted something. Starsky fought the steering-wheel and the sagging front end, the fender on the driver's side at an odd angle. Forward momentum dragged the Torino past the alley by a hundred feet. Sweat peeling at his backbone, he gave Hutch the nod, and Hutch popped the door open.

Shots cracked the air: three in rapid fire, and then silence. In that silence both men scrambled to the passenger side, front fender. Starsky hunkered low, peering around the front end. Seconds, mere seconds, ticked off -- enough for them to wordlessly agree, and Starsky slid along the passenger side of the car, heading for the back fender. Hutch waited, watching over the hood and then back at Starsky. Only television cops ever ran into a blind alley, even hearing gunfire.

The '64 Ford shot around in desperation, like a dog cornered. Windows dark-tinted, it looked demented as it pushed past the cruiser, ripping fenders against the warehouse wall and the cruiser's open door. Gathering power, it leapt from the mouth of the alley, fit between a lamppost and the Torino.

Hutch had seen the Ford coming, and had braced to run like hell or dodge and fire. As the old but still renowned suspension of the Ford screamed against the cement, the car balanced on two wheels -- then dropped. Hutch counted slowly, eons of time, so much time -- and then fired, hitting the passenger-side tires with three shots. The first two missed their targets. Not the third. As the Ford picked up speed, righting its stance, the third shot hit with explosive results.

Front end dropping, the Ford caught its bumper-edge on the curbing and slammed hard. The jolt sent the driver's side into the cement and the Ford lifted on the right, heading for Hutch as it spun. Door handles, then metal fenders, scoured and threw sparks as the car lurched back at the Torino. Hutch jumped away; the car slid from the street, went up the warehouse drive, flipped, and landed top-down against the sidewalk.

Running back around the Torino, catching sight of Starsky heading toward toward the downed car, Hutch got that sick feeling of pre-knowledge. He spotted 313 and simultaneously heard the soft 'pop' and then the roar as the Galaxie 500 caught fire.

Starsky, gagging on the certainty, backed away from a stupid attempt to pull the occupants free. It had been too late when the car hit the driveway, and he knew now that they'd been dead before it caught fire. He turned his attention to the fast-retreating Hutch, who was heading into the alley quickly but warily.

After calling in for the firetruck and seeing cruiser 209 (Masters and Heath) crop up around the corner, Starsky followed into the alleyway. 313 was sitting where it had been shoved, against the opposite wall of the warehouse. The passenger-side door had been thrown into the alley, and the car was empty. Its lights still blinked like a sleepy dumb thing, and its engine still nattered to itself about the line of work it was in. Hutch had worked his way back, and now stood by a pair of uniformed officers. Correction: Pinelli wasn't standing; he was half-leaning, half-lying against the wall.

Hutch crouched by Pinelli and blocked Starsky's view for a moment. T.D. glanced back down the alley, saw Starsky, and quickly looked away. Hutch rose and stepped back. Starsky could see the dark stains on Pinelli's usually pin-neat uniform shirt. Pinelli was talking softly. Starsky couldn't hear and didn't bother to go over. Pinelli had caught it in the shoulder, but he'd be all right.

As Masters trotted down the alleyway, Starsky shook off the sudden feeling that something was still coming down but he wasn't being told about it. An ambulance had pulled up behind the cruiser, and Hutch was walking back toward him. *It always happens this way, Starsky thought. Never neat, never like the old TV shows, never like people make it out to be... Pinelli's damned lucky and T.D. should have waited, blocked the entrance and got out of the car...*

Hutch leaned up against the wall, foot braced, hands stuffed in his jacket pockets. Head downturned, he tried to make the thoughts just go away for awhile.

"Pinelli?" Starsky asked him, just to be sure.

"He'll make it," Hutch said, still staring at his shoes.

It was Hutch's tone that made Starsky look back to where T.D. was lifting Pinelli, with the help of an ambulance attendant. He glanced back to Hutch, who still hadn't looked up. "Something?" he asked, very, very quietly.

"Yeah, something. I guess..." Hutch agreed, but didn't say what: only began ambling back through the alley, toward the street, in that loose gait of his. Starsky caught up, walking back to the car with him.

The air still held smoke and that hideous smell of burning oil and human bodies. Starsky reached, nudged Hutch in the back lightly. "Clear case of have-to," he said, though it didn't need saying, never did. And it was never easy. People stood in clots, watching with a variety of expressions as the fire department hosed the last hot metal down. Starsky logged in with HQ. Both men scrawled out scene-reports in silence, hearing the metal scrape and thud as the car was hauled over onto what was left of its wheels. Neither man bothered to look up.

Feeling that sense of futility, Starsky glanced at Hutch and started to ask. But Hutch looked up, his eyes saying 'don't ask me now', and studied the signed scene-report. "I'll get a ride with Masters," he decided. "Going to check on Pinelli." He put his hand on the door. "Now you've gotta get those motor-mounts fixed." It was his best bid; he wanted out of there. He didn't want to look up and feel or see Starsky's worry crawling over his features in a wreath of unasked questions.

"It's driveable," Starsky offered. "We'll both make a run to see Pinelli and drop off the reports." He reached, before Hutch could refuse, and started the engine. It didn't sound too good, not too good at all. "Tell you what; we get out of the station-house with our butts not raked over the coals, and you can buy me a beer."

Hutch relaxed against the seat. Starsky's tone warned him not to argue. He shut his eyes. *Lousy punks, lousy job, lousy car, lousy life... So who gives a damn?* He forgot to notice the Torino's so-sedate pace, or the slow wobble it made at every left turn. He was wrapped into the job of getting rid of the feeling that his whole life was going to be spent shooting out tires

and watching everything burn.

"Gonna tell me now, or in 3 weeks?" Starsky interrupted the depressed thoughts clearly on Hutch's mind. "You gonna make it miserable to work with you, or even be in this car with you?" They were sort-of-limping into the hospital parking lot.

Hutch refused to be baited. "I told you that front end was bad. I'm not getting back into the bucket for nothing or nobody until it's fixed. Just get a tow-truck to pick it up. It's bad enough we've got to risk our butts for dopers and punks without the motor bounding off the firewall, for crapsake." He slammed the door after him with a strength he didn't look to have in him.

Starsky sat, startled, in the car. The retreating figure happened to be reacting in a very strange manner. It wasn't just blowing away punks; it was something else. Hutch hated to use a gun, but that just wasn't all of it. Something inside Hutch, something beyond the normal reconciliation of actions to results, was going on in his mind. Starsky determined he was going to find out what it was.

Hutch had hunched against the drizzle seeping down his jacket collar to his neck. He walked through the parking lot and into the emergency room. After asking where Officer Pinelli had been taken and what his condition was, Hutch stalked to the elevators.

After checking at the desk, Starsky pulled up short. *Just why is he so interested in Pinelli? He's okay. Shoulder wound...bloody and painful and usually salvageable. So why?* "Hutch?" Starsky asked, coming up to him by the elevators, "Here." He shoved Hutch's service revolver and holster at him, wondering if his buddy ever realized that every time he had to use it, he afterwards took it off and just set it down. "Stop leaving that lying around, will ya?"

Hutch didn't bother to answer. He took the holster and gun and slipped it under the back of his jacket, tucked it into his belt.

"Look, you did what you had to. Every time you use that gun, you end up just setting it down anywhere. You'll wind up supplying some freak with a weapon if you don't start paying attention..." The doors opened.

Hutch silently got into the elevator, heading for ICU. Pinelli was to spend the time there until the right surgeon could be found willing to go hunting among some very important nerves in his shoulder for the slug. As he looked over to the main desk, to ask the vulturish-looking nurse which room Pinelli was in, Hutch saw T.D.'s jacket and baton on a nearby chair.

Creeping past the desk, Hutch entered the world of half-reality with its shadows and machines, its disturbing scents and sounds that registered below a man's consciousness. It was like walking into a bad dream awake, another bad dream to add to the last one.

Entering a room with a light on, he stuck to the shadow made by a half-closed drape. He stopped to glance at the glass. At first all he could see was his own face. *Jesus, you look old*, he thought. He saw a white blur, and looked past the reflection into the room.

T.D. was sitting in a chair by the telemetry banks. Pinelli was angled against the bed, half-upright, his face the color of a man losing a lot of blood. Hooked to the arm closest to Hutch's position was an IV, drop by drop

replacing the blood lost all over the alley bricks.

Hutch stood silently, not knowing why he did, why he didn't go on into the room and just ask T.D. himself. It was a minute -- or was it ten? -- and he couldn't keep his gaze anywhere but on Pinelli. He could not move but only watch, only hear the man's heart-rate click registering on the machine and the echo of it on the machine at the nurse's desk. Suddenly Pinelli's heart seemed to beat for his; it would beat, then his would. Then Pinelli's lungs would fill, another machine would click, and Hutch's lungs would fill. Back and forth, action/reaction, Hutch felt tied to that man in the bed.

He remembered when that had happened before; when it had been Starsky in there.

T.D. stood slowly, unfolding his frame from the chair, then walked over to the bed. Weaving his hand between the dangling tubing and the bed-rail, he found Joe's hand and covered it carefully. "First time for everything, Joe," Hutch heard T.D. say.

As if the words had released him, he started to leave.

Pinelli grated out: "Go on home...stop hangin' around, T.D." And then: "I'm not gonna die. I'm not gonna leave you."

You're seeing this through subjective eyes, Hutch warned himself, now without thought of leaving, without even the thought that he eavesdropped, as if he had to confirm what he knew all along. As if the world would stop turning or this afternoon would never have happened if he didn't stay. *Everything they do or say will seem a shade wrong. You won't ever forgive them if you're right, so just walk away now. Go find Starsky, buy him a damned beer, talk about the women in your life...or the ones that aren't, the ones that walked away...* But he remained motionless, in a dark place, looking in.

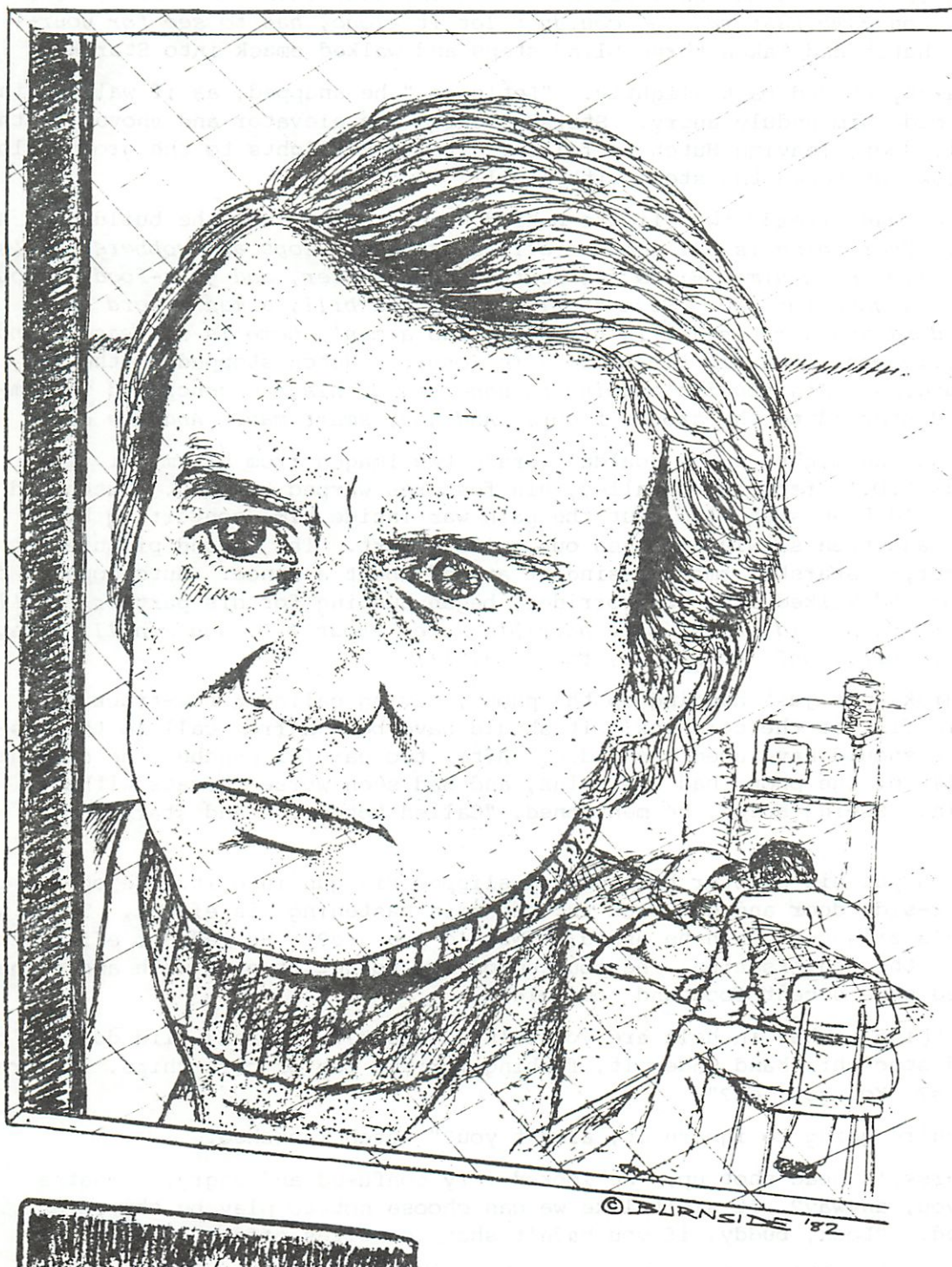
T.D. was shaking his head no, reaching to readjust the strap of the oxygen mask on Pinelli's face. "I told you I ain't going home, so shut up and sleep. As soon as you do, I'm going to find a snack bar. I'm hungry." T.D. drew back slightly, but not so far as to break his careful hold on Joe's hand. His voice drew back on itself and seemed to come from another person. "You... posturing son of a bitch, you and your John Wayne complex. 'Let's get 'em', you decide, and bail out of the car. What the hell did you do it for? He got past us, but that was all he got." Again his voice altered, reverted to what it had been before: gruff, slightly edgy, irritable as he added: "So shut up and do what you're supposed to be doing, resting and sleeping. You're higher than paradise right now, on the same stuff that punk killed to get at, so stop complaining. First time, Joe... Make it the damned last time." He leaned over, touching that ashen face. "I'll be here, around here somewhere, and I ain't leaving."

"Go home...landlady's supposed to pick up the rent." Joe wasn't about to give up. "Fix supper...work on your book..." The drug began to assert itself -- paradise wasn't so bad compared to the pain. He began to drift again.

"Good night," T.D. said simply. "We'll talk about it later."

"You always say that...every time...always say..." Joe slipped under.

T.D. glanced up towards the telemetry panel, but didn't see Hutch standing there. He bent, barely touching his lips to the pale, sweating forehead



of Joe Pinelli.

So... Hutch turned to leave. So now you've seen it. Now you believe yourself. You like thinking the worst; you make it come true. How many phonecalls did you overhear? How many times did you back around a doorway and turn around in a hallway, seeing or hearing just this same stuff. You knew it, you dumb bastard, and couldn't let it alone, had to see for your-- "UMPH!" Hutch had taken three blind steps and walked smack into Starsky.

Starsky shoved back slightly. "Let's go," he snapped, as if walking into him had made him unduly angry. Starsky dodged the elevator and shoved on the stairwell door, leaving Hutch to follow. It was 8 flights to the ground floor and Starsky attacked the steps with a will.

Hutch was already two flights behind when Starsky left the building. Ah, Starsky. Everything is all good or all bad to him. Cops and robbers. It's still so simple to him. Birds fly south in the winter, and junk-food is food and food is good for you. Sign the line, pay the bill, a man's word is as good as done and a man's job is his honor and a man's home is his castle and a man's...woman loves him her whole life long... Hutch stopped on the 2nd floor landing. Starsky isn't going to understand this, he concluded to himself, and started to the ground floor. And you, smart man? And you do?

Try as he might, Hutch couldn't erase two images from his mind. The first was T.D.'s face in the alley, his features warped by pain. Hutch had thought he'd been shot also, but the pain was inside him, contorting his features and then slowly smoothed out, with effort. The second picture was from memory: Starsky, smart-assing it around about a dance. Hutch opened the hall door and walked into the corridor, began hunting for his partner. He'll say something stupid, he'll make horrible jokes about T.D. and Pinelli always hitting it off...on? He saw it, too. SHIT!!!

Starsky was just hanging up the phone, having called a tow-truck. He aimed his fist at the coin-box; it should have been a free call to the dispatch, he should have used the radio. After two careful punches, he gave up. The gullet of the phone had his coins, and had seen worse threats without giving in. Seeing Hutch, he mentioned, "Called Dobey..." and started for the car.

Hutch put his holster back on and slipped his gun into it. He opened the passenger-side door and got back in, the rain hastening his effort. There was a minute's silence. Then he asked: "What'd you see?" He made no effort to edge into the conversation; he pounced on it, to get it over with and go home. He wanted some decent food and some sleep.

"Nothing. What in hell are you talking about?" Starsky slid down in the seat and stuck his hand under it, fishing for the bag of corn-chips. "Where's the chips? You got 'em?"

"You're going to ignore it, aren't you?" Hutch launched.

Starsky's head shot up; he looked very confused and angry. "What's eating you, anyway? It ain't like we can choose not to play by the rules..." He sighed. "Look, buddy, if you hadn't shot the tires offa that--"

"I'm not talking about that." Each word was said very clearly, and as quietly as Hutch could make it. He stared out the window.

"I am," Starsky pointed out flippantly, giving up the search for the corn-chips. He didn't want to think about anything for awhile, and knowing Hutch... Hutch was probably sitting on the corn-chips and laughing about it. ...No. He's pissed. He's outright pissed and his mind's whirling so loud and fast I can hear it clear over here. And Hutch never lets go of anything once it's in his mind... Starsky gave up all pretense. "So that's why you had to go and see Pinelli. You just had to poke and pry."

Hutch looked surprised.

Starsky punched at the steering-wheel brace with his thumb. "Let it go, Hutch. Just let it go."

"You don't understand," Hutch muttered, taking his familiar posture of weariness, mind's weariness. "They're not the only ones on the force."

Starsky stared at the steering wheel. "As far as I'm concerned, I don't know anything. I never do. It's up to them." He peered at his friend, then back to his thumb. "But I'll tell you something, Hutch. It ain't...right. It ain't what's supposed to be..." His words dwindled and halted.

"It's not what your world-plan is; it's just not fitting in, is it, Starsky?" Hutch's voice was mild, yet hinted at a trap.

"Why're we even discussing it? You're the one who got shook in the alley. I thought it was what came down. No. Then you decided to check it out, and whatever you see, you've got it figured for that?" Starsky snorted. "I hope you never bother to come see me in the hospital again. You'd probably--"

"Shut up," Hutch growled out.

"You'd probably..."

"Shut up! Listen to me!" Hutch was whispering, and the effect was as if he had shouted. He got silence, and took a deep breath. "They're lovers." He pointed out first fact, not last fact.

"Bullshit!" Starsky declared.

Hutch gave him a filthy look. "It doesn't fit into your idea of the world, and it won't fit into that neatly organized idea you have of life. But they are living together, and they do love each other, and they are lovers; they go to bed together and--"

"I never figured you had a perverted mind!" Starsky interrupted. He meant it. "I've heard some of the most...stupid ideas from you. You take a better look at what you saw back there. You saw two guys who work the same side of the fence. You saw two guys who're friends. They're buddies, Hutch. They'd rather walk that alley knowing the other guy's looking out for them than to safe it out at a desk job. You know that." Starsky reached out and gripped Hutch's forearm. "You know that sometimes outsiders see people like them -- like us, even -- and make cracks. But when the going gets tough I'd have them on my team, or you, trust any of them...you'd better believe that..."

"Sometimes you're so blind," Hutch insisted. "Sometimes things happen and you never ask 'hey, what if that were me?' You just slug it out, all through life, like nothing's ever going to happen to really touch you." He withdrew his arm from Starsky's grip. Then he accused, with a painfully well-worn assurance: "I'd choose you over a hundred people, my own family even." His



voice grew less sure. "Of course we're buddies, but so are they...and... would you ever...?"

"I'm gonna see about that tow-truck," Starsky cut in. "It's taken too damn long."

Hutch leaned over, grabbed Starsky's jacket-collar and hauled on it as his partner stared to bail out of the car. Starsky halted, the door staying half open.

"There is a line," Hutch grated out. "There's this line all of us watch real close without even knowing it. And when we get too close, too near it, we...step sideways...not forward, not over it. We follow that line, Starsky."

Starsky only looked confused and irritable. "Watch my mouth move, Hutch. I won't mumble. Listen closely, buddy..." The word brought him to a halt as Hutch nodded. He sat back. "You always make things out to be so damned complicated, and they aren't really. You say I go around blind and deaf to what's around me -- but I do ask. I saw the same thing you did, but I saw it clear-like; you saw it all muddled somehow."

"Then what did you see?" Hutch asked quietly.

"I saw T.D. holding Joe's hand. And I've held yours. It means diddly-squat when it's said, but when you're hurting and there's panic in your guts, it helps if someone you know cares enough to touch..." Starsky had said most of it with certainty, and didn't go any further than his assurance would carry him.

"Joe wasn't panicked. He's so wiggled out from painkillers and tranquilizers to keep him from moving around at all..." Hutch waited a moment, then pointed out: "He was safe, and he knew it."

"So?" Starsky wasn't being bullheaded; the thoughts just didn't seem to connect.

"So," Hutch cued, "What else did you see?"

"I saw him..." Starsky frowned. "I saw T.D. get emotional, reach out and touch somebody he cares a lot about, because they're buddies and they'd put their life on the line. They've got to depend on each other; everything has gotta be a no-words understanding. Each has got to know how the other reacts, and how bad a shot one of them is, and how fast the other can run. That's why they're like they are."

Hutch waited out the rationalization. "First of all, you'll never make it past a second-rate observer." Putting his back against the door, he faced his partner. "I saw T.D. kiss Joe's forehead." He sighed. "We sound like punks who've been window-peeking, but I saw more than buddies in there."

"We'll never agree. So what the hell does it matter?" Starsky felt irritation again. Here was Hutch about to make a Ringling's Circus out of one elephant.

"You trust them as back-up now, Starsky?" Hutch asked quietly.

"Sure! I trust all of 'em except Masters. Now Masters ain't half bad, but he's got no street-sense and--"

"Let me put it this way," Hutch cut through the bullshit. "Are we buddies?"

"Why would you ask?" Starsky demanded.

Hutch gave him a glare.

"Yes."

"I was trying to tell you, Starsky. There's a line..." He fought the out-of-control feeling down and continued. "It's like a sword-edge. And we're walking it."

Starsky's eyes widened.

"We're like anyone else on the force who works day in and day out with the same person for years. Except, we're worse. We've both got a lousy track-record at home, and we're both too damned independent..."

Starsky didn't like the way Hutch was acting. He certainly didn't like the way his normally-certain partner was so damned unsure.

"That sword-edge is always there. Most of us stay on top of it, just always stay right there." His hand made an edge, and he pointed to it with his other hand. "But something happens...it's been happening for years, all through history. Maybe first with soldiers, then labor unions...buddies, and..."

"What's happening, Hutch?" Starsky demanded, feeling Hutch fight for words and sensing the importance it seemed to hold for him. It was confusing, very confusing, just the same. He could imagine the line all right, but what about it? Why was this important?"

"Something, anything, happens -- and the two people standing there, these two people who have respect and honor and caring about each other... They can face death together, Starsky, and run when it's time to. They can be as positively opposite as night and day, but... And then something upsets the balance they have, and they...well, they fall over the edge. Or one falls, the other maybe jumps more than falls because it's his buddy over that edge. That's what happened to T.D. and Pinelli." Hutch let his hands fall to the dashboard.

"With T.D. and Pinelli..." Starsky said softly, more to himself than to Hutch. It made him understand, even if it was one of those nebulous areas that Hutch always knew about and pointed out so readily to him.

"They fell, or jumped, over the edge. When Pinelli first came to our precinct, I wondered why he'd refused the slot on the SWAT team. He has brains, real brains, but he had enough seniority to pick his spot. He worked with Black for about one week, and then T.D. signed on. I sort of noticed, when we all had to work those shitty shift-and-a-halves, that when one of them was working, the other still seemed to be just hanging around. Masters pulled duty with T.D. and said he was a lousy cop, but you look at Pinelli's reports and you've got to wonder..." Hutch corralled his survey of the last 3 years, and sighed. Starsky was looking out the window, and Hutch rarely saw such a pensive mood in him.

"So you automatically say they're lovers." Starsky's voice had changed, slipping into a rare tone. "It still doesn't matter. I can ignore it, if you can."

"Neither of us can afford to." Hutch's voice was icy cold.

Starsky didn't dare look at him. His thoughts were tumbling around as if

he were in a rock-polisher, and he tried only to think clear of the subject, find a way to get away from it so his head could clear. *Where is that damned tow-truck?!*

"It threatens you, doesn't it?" Hutch cut into Starsky's thoughts. "I've been sitting here wondering why such a squirrel-brained John Wayne garbage-food junkie matters... And wondering, too. What'll you ever do if I fall off the edge, or you do? Would you jump, Starsky? Would you--"

"Shut up!" Starsky shot back. "It ain't gonna happen, and I'm not so damn dumb as you always make me out to be. If Pinelli getting shot pushed one or the other of them over the line..."

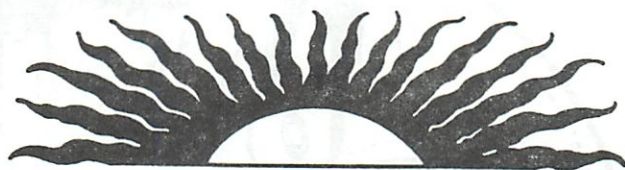
"That didn't. This has been going on for a long time."

"Hutch, what are you asking me?" Starsky pulled his chin off the steering wheel and twisted around, faced his partner.

Hutch kept staring out the windshield, looking at the light smeared from the Emergency Room door to the car hood, as if it held the answer. "You never look before you jump, Starsky." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Me, I always look first -- and I always think about things before they happen to me. Think about things, Starsky...before they happen...and try to look before you jump...or before you fall..."

The tow-truck lumbered into the far exit, did a fast sweep, turned and headed back out the same entrance to the parking lot. Starsky shoved on the door, yelling, but the driver didn't hear. He started to get back into the car as the rain began to pelt down seriously. Hearing a crunch, he looked down. The half-gone bag of corn-chips was under his shoe, now crushed and soaking in the rain.

Starsky noted, as if he'd just been handed a new fact, a life-long-ignored fact about himself: *Hutch is right. You never look. Never.*



Little Boy Blue

Sue-Anne Hartwick

*In your deep pools of blue
I can see
All the years we've toughed it out,
Love I couldn't survive without.
You were always there for me.*

*In these deep pools of blue
I can look
And see myself.*

*What man has known such wealth?
I know how much you care for me.*

*Reflection of your soul and mine.
I could search for years and never find
The depth of love I have with you.*

*I'll never deny its truth
To your deep pools of blue.*

Fall With Lucifer

by

Jeannie
Mai
Butkis



Starsky woke in a foul mood. His eyes felt gritty with insufficient sleep. There was an incipient ache in his head. His mouth tasted bad. Symptoms of a hangover, surely. He rolled painfully out of sweaty sheets and stumbled to the bathroom, hunting aspirin.

He was almost to the medicine cabinet when he remembered that he hadn't been drunk last night.

He paused, idly staring at his bleary reflection, and tried to unravel the sour mystery. The gears of his brain made a single creaking turn to produce the answer.

He's leaving today.

Pain bulged his throat. He coughed it away, spat a meaningless obscenity and reached for his toothbrush. He plied it quickly, carelessly. Even the toothpaste tasted bad. He nicked himself shaving before he finally realized that his hands were shaking. He swore again, finished the job roughly and dabbed at the cut with a fragment of tissue paper. It was shaping up to be a lousy day.

Starsky briefly considered a shower, and automatically glanced down at himself. The three bullet-scars stood out livid against his chest, like extra nipples. He shuddered and looked away. "Shit," he muttered to nothing in particular. His throat hurt again. He ignored it.

He hurried out of the bathroom and pawed through his clothes. The jeans would do for another day; the shirt wouldn't. He noticed that the apartment was sullenly hot and sticky; bad weather had been promised the night before. He pulled on a fresh shirt, not bothering with a T-shirt under it. As he squirmed into his clothes, the silence in the apartment grew heavy as the muggy gray air. Irritated, he reached for the shoulder-strapped portable radio that he'd been wearing almost religiously for the past week, snapped it on, and dialed at random for a rock-music station.

*Wheel in the sky keeps on turning.
Don't know where I'll be tomorrow.
Wheel in the sky keeps me yearning.
I don't know, I don't know, don't know...*

Unaccountably chilled by that, Starsky dialed it away and looked for some innocuous instrumental. The first station he encountered was giving a weather report: hot and humid until late afternoon, heavy overcast, 90% chance of thundershowers before evening, temperatures in the low 90s. He listened with half an ear; his eyes wandering to the dun-gray overcast sky outside the window. It was going to be a perfectly rotten day.

He's leaving today, the treacherous thought came back. Friends, partners for 7 long years...and today it ends.

"Goddammit!" he snapped aloud, bouncing off the bed. He turned the radio dial to loud-caterwauling heavy-metal rock and fled the apartment. He could always pick up breakfast on the way to Parker Center. Anything was better than sitting here brooding about things that couldn't be changed.

* * *

Starsky didn't get breakfast after all; it was too early for The Pits to be open, and the very smell of the available breakfast-serving greasy-spoons turned his stomach. Starsky wondered, as he picked up his assignment sheets and ducked out of the office, whether he was coming down with a cold. He couldn't remember his appetite ever being this poor when he was healthy. He sat in the Torino, drumming his fingers in time with the endless rock music, and waited for his new partner to show.

After a few minutes he duly noted the hulking silhouette coming across the parking lot. He frowned at the approaching shape. *Why the hell did Dobey assign me Irish?* he wondered. *Why the hell did it have to be somebody big and blond and blue-eyed? He's a constant reminder...*

'Irish' spotted him and waved. Starsky looked away, knowing he was being unfair. Beyond coloration all similarity ended; at 6'7" and 290 pounds, broad-faced and snub-nosed and as Slavic as a map of Warsaw, Sergeant Zbigniew Brzezinski looked nothing at all like Hutch. When he'd first come to Metro, the personnel clerk had taken one look at his bland face and unpronounceable name, and quipped: "Obviously you're Irish." The name stuck -- if only because nobody knew how to pronounce his real name without stumbling, and nobody wanted to risk annoying him by calling him 'Polack'. Irish himself didn't mind, aside from a laughing comment that his friends could call him 'Biggy' if they liked. Nobody took him up on it. His easy-going nature was somehow so bland that while everybody got along with him, nobody got close enough to risk teasing him. He drifted from assignment to assignment, filling in wherever needed, and now he'd been assigned to Starsky.

Irish smiled affably as he pulled the Torino's door open and slid onto the front passenger seat. "Hi, Starsky," he offered, hauling the door shut with a ham-like paw. "Where we goin' today?"

"Downtown." Starsky shrugged. "Look for some bop-and-roll artist around Ye Olde Tenderloin." He handed Irish the sheets, turned the music up a little louder and started the car.

"Hmm. Gay country," Irish considered. "This guy specialize in Gay-bashing?"

Goddammit, why'd you have to call it that? Why so fucking polite, you big dumb Polish sausage? Don't you ever get nasty over anything? "Looks to be shaping up that way," Starsky snapped, stomping on the Torino's gas-pedal. "It may not be Christmas, but 'Tis The Season To Beat Fairies -- tra-la la-la la..." *Well, I feel nasty!*

Irish gave him a surprised and faintly hurt look.

Miserably pleased to have gotten under that thick Polack skin, Starsky steered toward the nearest boulevard.

Stroke me, stroke me... jeered the radio.

"You're in a sweet mood today," Irish grinned. "Gotta toothache?"

"I'm workin' on a cold," Starsky relented. "Feel lousy." *That's the truth ... Dammit, why did Dobey stick me with this job? He oughtta know how I'd feel about queers after...after...*

Unbidden, the image rose again: Hutch, quiet and solemn-faced, sprawled on the sofa as he'd sat so many times before, relaxed except for the white-knuckled grip on his can of beer.

"Babe, there's something I've got to tell you..."

And then the world had fallen apart.

God damn you, Hutch! You were my best friend, best in the world, and I could honestly say that I loved you more than anybody on Earth, and then you had to go spoil it, dirty it, take that one goddam step too much, too far, over the line...

Starsky gritted his teeth, remembering when Hutch had used those very words.

I can't say you didn't give me warning, hints...weeks and maybe months before you finally dropped the bomb... I suppose I could have taken the hint and backed off any time, but I just couldn't believe that of you...not you, dammit!

And he remembered the naked words falling like stones between them, building a wall that nothing could ever breach again. Hutch so sad-eyed and relentless, quietly reciting a litany of the unforgiveable.

"...I've loved you for a long time. I don't know when it changed, became something more...only, after you damn-near died from Gunther's goons, I finally recognized it...couldn't hold it off anymore."

Prophetic cold had choked him in that heartbeat-pause because he suddenly knew what Hutch was going to say, didn't want to hear it, couldn't stop the terrible words that would ruin the whole world for them.

"What I'm trying to tell you, Babe, is that I've fallen in love with you. I've fallen off the edge. I can't stop it, and I don't know what the hell to do about it. All I can do is tell you the truth. I guess the next move's yours, Starsk."

And he had moved. Stumbling backward, clumsy, wide-eyed, feeling his way blindly across the length of the room, watching the faint light in those pale blue eyes gutter and die out as realization came -- and then he turned and bolted. Ran. Clattered down the stairs and dived into the Torino and roared away into the darkness, putting miles of safety behind them.

And nothing had been the same between them afterward.

We...couldn't touch anymore. Couldn't even sit close. Couldn't talk much, either. Everything that used to be good and warm and innocent... All gone. Dirtied. Meaning something else now, something ugly, perverted. Invisible walls between us. More than a month like this--

Finally, the ultimate betrayal: Hutch had given up. Quit. Transferred.

Goddam you, Hutch! If I could stand it, why couldn't you?! Running away-- Oh, you goddam weakling at the finish! You damn queer! You fairy! Maybe I should be grateful I got away clean--

...And he's leaving today...

"Uh, Starsky..." Irish's mild baritone voice intruded. "Do you always run stop signs like that?"

"What stop sign?" Starsky asked, jarred. Where-- What street are we on?

Irish shook his head. "You've gotta have a charmed life. Maybe if I stick

with you, some of it'll rub off on me."

"No chance, junior!" Starsky growled. His throat was hurting again. "It wouldn't work for you anyway." *There: street sign... God, this far already?!*

"Aw, I think I'm pretty lucky to be workin' with you," Irish insisted, calmly cheerful as always. "A chance to be your partner... Wow. That doesn't happen every day."

"It may happen a helluva lot hereafter! Keep your eyes on the street, Irish. Don't miss anything. You won't last a week down here if you don't develop your cop-sense." Starsky chivvied and nagged him all the way down to the target zone, desperately trying to keep both their minds off the inevitable question.

How long before he says: "Why'd you and Hutch split up?" What do I say then? It's nobody else's goddam business if my best friend turned...

All in all, you're just another brick in the wall... sang the radio.

* * *

They tooled quietly through the crowded district, Irish as imperturbable as ever, Starsky fidgetting worse at every block. He scowled at every male couple he saw, whether they were holding hands or not, dressed obviously or not. He damned Dobey repeatedly for sticking him with this assignment, as if it were a personal insult. *Rubbing my nose in it... Shit, there's another pair of them!* He glared at two men in business suits who were doing nothing more than chatting on a street-corner, one with an arm draped amiably around the other's shoulders. Starsky bared his teeth as the car passed them. *Welcome to Fairyland! Queers everywhere.*

Ohhh, got that bug! sang the radio.

"Doesn't seem to be much going on here," Irish concluded. "Let's try the next block."

"Nothin' goin' on?" Starsky gunned the Torino through the intersection, grimly pleased to make the pedestrians jump out of his way. "This place's got more pansies in it than a flower-show."

Irish favored him with a raised eyebrow. "I mean, this block is no place for a mugging in broad daylight. If our joker's here, he wouldn't find any easy pickings: no good ambush-spots, and too many eyes on the street."

"Well, yeah..." Starsky conceded. *What's the matter with me? Try thinking like a cop again, idiot! Nobody's asking you to comment on the scenery...* But he couldn't shake his irritable awareness, nor the cloud of overwhelming resentment. *They* were everywhere, enemy and insult, all sharing a joke at his expense. He'd been down here before, hunting John Blaine's killer, and even then it hadn't gotten to him as badly as this. There seemed to be hand-holding, subtly-cuddling, secretly-smiling pairs everywhere -- hosts, ranks, armies of them -- and he was hopelessly outnumbered. A sense of claustrophobia choked him. He saw a blond man walking arm-in-arm with a tall Black partner, and for one horrible moment he thought it was Hutch.

Is this how he's going to wind up? Sashaying around on some red-light-zone

street like this, hustling one-night stands, prey for the fag-bashers...

The pain grabbed his throat again, and he coughed for several minutes to get rid of it.

"Y'oughtta do something about that cough," Irish observed.

Love is the drug, and I need to score, commented the radio.

Starsky clenched his hands on the wheel and silently damned everything and everybody, finishing with the weather. He took the Torino around the next corner and set his mind on searching for likely mugger-sites.

This side-street looked like better hunting ground: somewhat rundown commercial buildings, blank storefronts, an alley. Starsky drove into the alley, tires crunching slowly over neglected trash, peering into backyards and shadows, noting the lack of population in here. Yes, this looked very promising.

"I'm not one to knock my own good luck," said Irish, "But I'd like to know what I owe it to. How come you and Hutchinson broke up?"

Starsky slammed on the brakes, gasping as if he'd been thrown into cold water. Irish yelped in surprise as he thudded against the dashboard. Starsky gulped hard, thought fast, scrambled for an excuse. "Goddam broken glass!" he invented. "Could rip the shit outta my tires..." He weaved the car with elaborate care through a perfectly safe stretch of alley. "Damn drunks just throw their fuckin' bottles anywhere. Gotta watch out for the stuff."

"Yeah," Irish accepted that. "I didn't even see it."

"Keep your eyes peeled, all the time." Starsky glowered at the windshield. "You never know what kinda shit the creeps are gonna throw at you." Or even your best friend... Damn you, Hutch! How could you do that to me?!

"Well, as I was sayin'," Irish resumed his tack, "Why'd Hutchinson cut out on you?"

Starsky ground his teeth until they ached. *Goddam you too, stubborn Polack... Think. Think...* "Uh, well, he just couldn't take it anymore." "I couldn't hold off anymore..." "He wanted to change." "I don't know when it changed..." "Ah, hell! He wanted to do something-- be something different, and I just couldn't follow him there! Something happened... These lousy streets, this shitty job, whole goddam dirty life -- it did something to him. It..." *Warped him--* "--Bent him outta shape. I tried to keep goin' with him like before, but it didn't work. Just didn't work..." *All changed. Things that used to be so good, so harmless, suddenly full of danger. Couldn't even let him put his arm around me, because it might mean...*

I'm looking through you. Where did you go?

I thought I knew you. What did I know?

You don't look different, but you have changed.

I'm looking through you. You're not the same.

Sudden vision of patient, quiet, suffering blue eyes.

Damn you, stop looking at me like that! As if it were my fault...

Why, tell me why, would you not treat me right?

Love has a nasty habit of disappearing overnight.

...Just because I wouldn't...couldn't...

"He couldn't take it, dammit! He couldn't!"

Hutch, how could you run out on me like this? Run away, leave me to face this crummy city and job and life all alone...

"Sorry to hear about it," Irish sympathized, maddeningly calm and affable. "Just goes to show, it can happen to the best of us."

"Yeah. The best." Starsky coughed hard. ...And he's leaving today...

The pain wouldn't get out of his throat. It threatened to choke him. Desperate for something to fix his attention on, Starsky scanned the alley. Yes: a side-alley branched off to the left, obscured by buildings, thicketed with clusters of garbage-cans and tall dumpsters. Suspicious. Good. Starsky slowed the car to a crawl and peered down the darkened passage.

Motion. Two figures down there. Standing too close.

A buy? A mugging?



Recharged, grateful, Starsky gave Irish a warning shush. He cruised past the sub-alley mouth, quietly braked the car, opened the door and slid out. "I saw something funny," he whispered. "Keep down, but cover me."

"Saw what?" Irish whispered back, awkwardly levering his bulk out of the car.

"Looked like two guys confabbing. Shh." Starsky eased around the corner, searched for the next cover, sliding his hand toward his holster. There was a dumpster maybe 5 feet ahead. He hurried soundlessly to it, crouched in its shadow, peered ahead. No clear sight yet of the quarry.

"Starsky, wait," Irish hissed at him from the corner. "Could be nothin'. In this district, any two guys together might just be makin'--"

"Shh!" Waving him back, Starsky whipped silently around the dumpster and took cover behind a cluster of oil-drum garbage-cans. From here, his view of the back of the sub-alley was a little better. The two figures weren't much more than silhouettes.

The larger one had its hands around the smaller one's neck.

Mugging! Or worse! Starsky slipped out his automatic, jacked the slide, targetted the next dumpster and dived for it. He made it in less than a second, and in almost perfect silence. He paused to listen, hear if his quarry had noticed him.

Apparently not. There was no sound of alarm or flight, only a faint muttering.

Now! Starsky leaped out from behind the dumpster and landed on spread feet, arms raised straight at the shoulder, elbows braced, Beretta perfectly aimed. "Freeze!" his voice crackled off the walls. "Break it up!"

The two figures jumped, turned, stared at him. The taller one was dark, Italian-looking, wearing dancer's tights and a tank-top. The other was dark blond, similarly dressed save that his dance-shirt was striped and there was a towel over one shoulder. Their feet were shoved into soft dance-slippers, skins visibly sweat-slicked, lean and muscular as well-exercised racehorses. Stencilled on the propped-open metal door behind them were the words 'STUDIO DOOR' and 'FIRE EXIT'.

I've roused a couple of dancers. Starsky felt like kicking himself. His gun lowered.

"Sweet Jesus," the taller one gasped. "It's the Basher!"

"Oh christ," the blond dancer muttered. "I left the tear-gas pen inside with my clothes."

Unconsciously, they reached for each other. Without need for sight, for thought, their hands met and clung.

Starsky felt silent firebombs go off in his head, throat, gut. *Goddam queers! How dare you--* "Police!" he yelled. "Put yer fuckin' hands up, you fairies!"

Their expression didn't change.

"Shakedown..." the blond whispered.

The darker man made a fast decision, gripped his partner's arms and swung him bodily through the doorway. As the blond man stumbled to safety, the tall dancer threw himself across the opening and braced his arms against the door-frame, blocking the gap with his body. His face was very pale and set.

Migod he's playing Human Shield--

"Larry, no!" the blond wailed, scrambling to his feet. He grabbed his buddy around the waist and tried to pull him through the doorway.

The dark dancer didn't budge. "Run, Jack," he said quietly.

"Not alone!" The blond tugged him again, harder.

How fucking dare you! Starsky's vision smeared to burning dysfunction. Blindly, he raised the Beretta.

"Starsky!!! What the christ are you doing?!" Irish's bull-like bellow filled the alley.

Shocked off balance, Starsky whirled, stumbled, dropped to one knee. *Look out for the gun!* He fixed his attention desperately on that detail. *Don't let it go off by accident...* He thumbed the safety on.

Behind him, dimly, he heard running footsteps and the heavy boom of the studio door being slammed shut.

They got away. Starsky shook his head hard, blinked his vision clear and looked up into Irish's shocked face. "I thought--" he gulped, "I thought..." *Think fast, stupid. What were you doing? How the hell are you going to explain...* He began to shake. "It looked like the one guy was chokin' the other one!"

Irish shook his big head in disgust and amazement. "F'r chrissake, Starsky, couldn't you tell they was just kissin'?"

"No." The pain in Starsky's throat pulsed, nearly intolerable. He coughed raggedly.

"You might've expected to see that around here," Irish scowled.

"How the fuck should I know?" Starsky snarled, pain fueling his outrage. "I'm not exactly an expert on the mating habits of tinkerbells!" He lurched to his feet, shoving the Beretta guiltily into its holster.

Irish glanced at the closed studio door. "C'mon, already. We're just wasting time here."

Starsky shrugged, stalked back to the main alley and dropped himself into the Torino's front seat. He fixed his gaze on the windshield while his mind's eye replayed that scene by the door.

"Run, Jack."

"Not alone!"

The seat sagged as Irish slid in beside him. Starsky shook himself free of the vision and started the engine. The Torino crept on down the alley. Irish took care to examine the buildings for signs of illicit life, which suited Starsky perfectly. His personal demons were dancing freely in his head. He remembered the way the dancers had looked at him, eyes not changing one iota

when he'd announced that he was a cop.

..."Shakedown"...? Cops and robbers, both the enemy? ...Is Hutch going to wind up like that? Hunted, prey to shakedowns, bashings, god knows what... Who's going to protect him then? I won't be there...

Shit, I don't even know where he's going! He didn't tell me. Dobey hasn't either. I might never see him again! He could get killed out there-- Mauled to death in some alley by some fag-basher, or worse, while picking up some cheap trick for the night...some creep who might even be an attacker in disguise. That's an angle...

He spared a glance for Irish. "Don't go by appearances. Our fairy-mugger might be disguised as one of their hustlers. It'd be perfect cover."

"Maybe." Irish scratched his jaw. "But the witnesses say he sneaked up on 'em. I don't think he'd change his M.O. without reason."

Starsky didn't answer. He was off on a private tack again, imagining Hutch as one of the dancers in the alley. "Run, Jack." "Not alone!" He shuddered. That had to be a fluke, a rarity. They aren't usually like that. If the Basher came up on you, Babe, the other guy'd turn and run and leave you to face it alone...

But he remembered the little one grabbing his partner, trying to pull him to safety, finally succeeding. A terrible suspicion sneaked into Starsky's mind. You're so goddam beautiful, such a fucking obvious prize, they'd fall all over themselves chasing after you. You just might find one who'd throw caution away and love you like crazy...the way you said you wanted to love me... one that would protect you, risk his neck for you...maybe even make you love him, forget about me...

...Forget that you ever loved me enough to risk your neck, fall over the edge, give up everything...

For an instant he saw, clear-edged and sharp as a photograph, Hutch walking away with that tall dancer in the alley. Holding hands. Smiling at each other. Walking off into the shadows, forever away from him.

Hutch, you can't!

He swore incoherently and pounded his fist on the wheel.

"Starsky?" Irish's voice jarred him back to the present. "You mind telling me why they bug you so much? The Gays, I mean."

Starsky gasped, covered it with another cough. "I just don't like 'em," he managed. "It-- It ain't right." God, how stupid that sounds!

"Well, a lotta things ain't 'right' that don't do much harm. I don't see you getting all lathered up about peaceable drunks, or johns going to whores, or--"

"This is different!" Stupid, stupid...

"I don't see how. I mean, what harm did they ever do to you?"

"Plenty!" Starsky yelled, his raw throat uncontrollable. "They fucking robbed me! They--" Shut up, you stupid bigmouth! Shut up! "None of your goddam business, Irish! I got my reasons. Just let it go at that."

"Okay." Irish shrugged in elaborate unconcern. "But if you got a grudge against 'em, maybe you shouldn't be working this assignment."

"I don't wanta work this assignment." Starsky glared at the oncoming traffic as he turned the Torino out of the alley. "Try telling it to Dobey."

"Well, hell," Irish grinned. "Let's head back to the center for lunch, and you can tell him yourself. I mean, if you tell him right out in front that you got a grudge and can't be objective, he's gotta respect that."

"Yeah," Starsky considered, cooling off a little. *I haven't really asked him. Should. Maybe I can ask where Hutch is going, too...* "You've got a point, there. How long before we can go back?"

"Maybe half an hour, unless you want to cut it short here."

"Yeah." Starsky spun the Torino back toward the main drag with more enthusiasm than he'd felt for anything all day.

* * *

"If you feel that you can't handle this assignment, I'll respect your judgement and take you off it." Dobey fixed Starsky with a hard, level gaze. "But I won't tell you where Hutchinson is transferring to. He specifically asked me to keep it confidential, and I respect his judgement too."

"Goddammit, I can't let him disappear like this!" Starsky fought back a sudden insane urge to hurdle the desk, grab his superior officer by his bull-like neck and shake the truth out of him. *What did Hutch tell you, anyway? "I've gotta-- I wanta know he's-- he's..." --not lying dead in an alley somewhere, not sashaying off into that country forever with somebody else, not forgetting all that he was, we were...* "Dammit, I'm not the one that kicked him out!"

"...What?" Dobey did a double-take.

"I can't just throw away 7 years of my life!" Starsky almost screeched. The strangeness of his own voice shocked him. *I didn't mean it like that! I ...what the hell did I mean? What the hell's wrong with me? Sore throat...* He coughed fast, repeatedly.

"Do something about that cold." Dobey edged away from him, fiddling absently with some papers on his desk. "If Hutchinson wanted you to know where he was going, he'd have told you himself."

"I-- He said he was gonna..." Starsky invented. "I was s'posed to see him the other night, but I hadda go talk to a snitch and couldn't make it. I couldn't reach him by phone... Maybe he thinks I'm mad at him. Aw, it's all a mistake, Cap'n. You gotta tell me!"

"If it's all a mistake, then you can clear it up with a phonecall from your desk," Dobey pronounced. "You'll have plenty of opportunity for that, since I'm setting you on paperwork for the rest of the day."

"Paperwork?! Aw, c'mon..."

"You shouldn't be running around with that cold. Go catch up on some of your overdue reports. And don't bother whining around my door for the next

hour; I'm going out for lunch."

Starsky went, glum but resigned. He flopped into his chair and considered that maybe a stack of dumb papers weren't as bad as tiptoeing through the tulips in Fairyland. He tried to phone Hutch, got no answer.

He's leaving today... The thought nagged. What if he's already gone? What if it's too late? What if--

Maybe it was too late 3 days ago, when he told me he was leaving.

Starsky froze with his hand on the phone, held captive by a memory as sharp as an edge of broken glass: the image of the last time he'd seen Hutch's face. Perhaps the last time, ever.

He told me he had to leave. It couldn't be helped. We couldn't go on like we'd been doing. His eyes looked dead. Except when...

He asked me one last time if I'd be willing to try it with him, just once.

And I backed away. Again. And the light in his eyes went out. Maybe for the last time.

I did that. I did throw him away.

Irish came ambling over. "Hey, partner--" he started.

Starsky flinched as if he'd been burned. "Don't call me that!" he shouted, loud enough to make heads turn nearby. "Nobody's my partner but Hutch, and don't you ever forget it!"

Irish backed away, blond eyebrows rising. "Sorry," he said. "I only wanted to use the phone, if you're done with it."

"I'm not." Starsky turned back to the phone, feeling his cheeks burn. He dialed Hutch's number again with savage jerks of his fingers. Again, no answer. He let it ring a dozen times before he gave up.

Could he have left already? Starsky pondered, shivering. Dobey might know, but the Captain was out, and Starsky shied from the thought of asking him anything further. He remembered his skills. Imagine Hutch is just some civilian I want to keep tabs on. How do I find out if he's... Movers! He grabbed the yellow-pages phonebook, opened to movers, and started dialing again.

Irish, watching him, eventually gave up and used the pay-phone down the hall.

It took exactly 26 calls to find the moving company that had a current order with a K. Hutchinson of Venice Place. No, the customer's belongings hadn't been picked up yet. Yes, to the best of their knowledge, the customer was still residing at the same address. No, they didn't have the forwarding address; the belongings were to be put in storage for an unspecified amount of time.

Starsky hung up the phone and tried to make sense of that. *Why won't you answer your phone, if you're still there? Why did you tell Dobey not to tell me where you're going? Why's your stuff going into storage, instead of with you?* The questions rolled aimlessly as marbles, coming to rest nowhere.

The squadroom was emptying out. Irish came back in and settled at an

empty desk. He looked around him, shrugged, pulled out a classic laborer's lunchbox and extracted an equally-classic thermos bottle and ham sandwich. Starsky, glancing at him, felt his stomach rumble for attention. If that had been Hutch, he could have gone over to him and asked for a share of the sandwich. If it'd been Hutch, he would have playfully argued, lectured on nutrition, compromised by phoning an order to the nearest deli. But it wasn't Hutch, and there was an invisible barrier that prevented any such interaction.

It occurred to Starsky that he was more cut off from Safely Straight men than he'd ever been with Hutch, before or even after the catastrophic revelation.

*I'd rather be mis'rable with you
Than lonely without you...*

Starsky snapped the radio off, momentarily preferring silence.

Kandapoulos, the new clerk downstairs, came trotting up with a cardboard box full of assorted papers. He spotted Starsky and headed toward him. "Hey, Sergeant Starsky, your partner left all this stuff downstairs. Get it to him for me, will ya?"

Starsky blinked for a second, then sat up fast and grabbed the box. "Sure thing," he enthused. "Glad to. ...What is all this stuff?"

"Old case-notes, near as I can figure." Kandapoulos turned and walked off. "Long as he's leaving, there's no point keeping it in his locker."

Starsky gumbled through the papers, turning up jottings on cases he'd almost forgotten, raising shards of memories that prickled and hurt. He coughed and rubbed his eyes as he pawed through them. Maybe somewhere in here was a clue to where Hutch was going, what he was up to.

"Starsky, you wanta cough-drop?" Irish came up, holding out a box of Smith Brothers'.

Starsky shook his head and burrowed on through the fragmentary notes. His hand closed on a packet. Photographs. He pulled them out, looked at them one by one. After the third he realized where they'd been taken: a trip to Disneyland, double dating with a couple of pretty-but-forgettable girls, shortly before he'd been shot in the police garage. There was himself, his girl and Hutch standing in front of the Matterhorn ride. There was himself, Hutch's girl and Hutch at the doors of the Haunted Mansion. There was himself and both girls shaking hands with a macrocephalic Mickey Mouse. There was Hutch and both girls standing in front of the Last Chance Saloon. There was himself and Hutch wrestling playfully in front of the lagoon, himself cheerfully threatening to throw Hutch in, and Hutch looking properly horrified.

Starsky's vision blurred as another throat-pain jumped at him. *We had it so good together...we had it so damn good...*

It occurred to him that Hutch would have gotten these back, had them to look at, shortly after the Gunther caper began. *All those weeks and months I was in the hospital...almost died a couple times, they tell me... How often did he take these out and look at them, thinking they might be the last he'd ever see of me?*

The tears spilled over his eyes. He rubbed them away, terrified that they

might show. He gritted his teeth, set his vision fiercely on the photos, and turned to the next one.

It was Hutch and himself, leaning against some sort of ornamental railing, eating popsicles. There was himself, enthusiastically licking a raspberry-red column of ice. There was Hutch, smiling at him, sucking on a cherry-red one.

It was the smile that hurt.

Smiling. At me. Sucking on the goddam--

A shudder of revulsion shook him from head to foot. Starsky crumpled the snapshot in his hand and threw it, without looking, as far away from him as he could.

No! Not me, damn you! Not me!

"So that's it!" Irish's voice rang like a bell behind him.

Starsky spun around. Irish was standing behind his chair, with a clear view of the desk, the box, the photos, everything. His broad Slavic face was no longer bland; it was blazing with revelation. *He saw!* Starsky realized, going cold. *He knows!!*

"Mother of God," Irish breathed, staring at him. "That's why you hate the Gays so much. That's what they 'robbed' you of: your partner! He committed the unforgiveable sin of falling in love with you -- so you threw him away!"

"Shut up!!!" Starsky screamed.

The pain soared, blinding him. He lunged sightlessly out of his chair and slugged at where he thought Irish's head was. He missed, felt his knuckles scrape an ear, harmlessly.

The return blow didn't miss. A fist the size of a small canned ham caught him in the mouth, snapping his head back. Starsky felt himself flying, feet going out from under him. He skidded along the floor on his shoulder-blades and fetched up against the nearest wall.

His vision cleared just in time to see another huge hand reach down and grab most of his shirt-front. The cloth creaked, began to tear, as Irish hauled him to his feet -- then literally picked him up and pinned him against the wall. Starsky hung half-strangled in his own shirt, kicking feebly, looking down into raging blue eyes as hot as gas-jets. Flame-blue eyes, like Hutch's. He gulped for air, tasted blood on his mouth. *I think he split my lip...*

"You fucking bigot," Irish whispered through bared teeth. "So that's what broke up the famous team. Everybody knew he was straight as a die, but he made one goddam slip -- one fall off the straight-and-narrow -- and you went all holy-and-pure on him, didn't you? God forbid your best friend should even think of wanting your precious lily-white ass! And I saw the way you carried on, when you learned about John Blaine, too. Jesus, he was lucky he was dead when you found out!"

I didn't think it showed! Jolted by that, Starsky paused in his ineffectual struggles. *I didn't really mean--*

"If you could do that to your best friend and partner of 7 years," Irish hissed, "Not to mention the best cop in the district for 15 years and more,

then what the hell would you do to me, Starsky?"

"...Y-you?!" Starsky gaped at him.

"Yeah, me." The broad Slavic face tightened into a hideous smile. "Don't look much like a Tinkerbelle, do I? All the same, I'm one of those Fairies you hate so much. Me, Irish. Me, 'Biggy'! Three guesses who calls me that, and why! Whatsamatter, Starsky? Didn't you think they made Polish faggots?"

"You too..." Starsky whimpered, feeling something inside him shatter, leaving him to fall endlessly in the dark. *Migod, they're everywhere! Everything...*

"'Faggot'..." Irish smiled on. "Know where that cute name comes from? They used to burn us at the stake, y'know. Didn't want to waste good expensive firewood on us, either -- just cheap stuff, bundles of sticks. 'Faggot' means 'bundle of sticks'. That's what it comes from, Starsky: 'flaming faggots'. Cute, huh?" He shoved Starsky harder against the wall. "You don't mind, do you? You'd be happy to throw me into the fire, wouldn't you? Me and everybody like me -- even Hutchinson."

"N-no..." Starsky choked out. *He's not cooling down. He's working up to a real mad. He's going to punch me through this wall before he's done.*

"You threw away your partner of 7 years..." Irish banged him against the wall, hard enough to make his teeth rattle. "And you bad-mouthed Blaine after he was dead. So what would you do to me, Starsky? Me that you don't know from Adam's off-ox, or care jack-shit about. I'm supposed to trust you at my back? Bleeding Heart of Mary, I wouldn't trust you 10 feet in front of me, in broad daylight!"

The alley-- What I did-- He saw... Starsky struggled to breathe, hearing his shirt give way. *What if he's right? What if I can't be trusted?! What if--*

With a loud rip, the shirt tore through. Starsky slid to the floor. His legs buckled, dropping him the rest of the way. The big Polish cop loomed over him, still clutching the torn shirt-front in his fist.

"You worthless bigotted bastard!" Irish spat.

Footsteps rattled along the floorboards: somebody coming into the squad-room. They both looked. It was Dobey, back from lunch, holding a deli-package under one massive arm.

"What the hell's going on here?" the Captain bellowed.

"I'm getting a new partner, that's what!" Irish roared right back. "Get me somebody else. I can't deal with bigots!" He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room, clamped fist still holding the forgotten rag of Starsky's shirt.

"'Bigots'...?" Dobey turned on Starsky. "What's the matter with him?"

"G-gg..." *If I tell on him, he'll tell on me.* Starsky pointed vaguely at Irish's retreating back. "Touchy!" he said.

Dobey heaved a mountainous sigh. "What'd you do? Crack Polack jokes?"

I damn-near killed two innocent people because I didn't like the way they got it on... Starsky felt his cheeks flaming. "I...don't wanna talk about it," he mumbled.

Dobey shook his head, helped Starsky to his feet. "Starsky, your lip's bleeding," he noted.

"Uhuh..." Starsky probed it gingerly. Not split, just cut and sore. "It's alright."

"He tore half your shirt off."

Starsky peered down at himself, saw his chest bared and the white scars almost glowing in the dull light. With a faint squeak of dismay, he pulled his jacket around him. He blushed as if he'd been caught naked.

"If you can't get along with The Unshakeable Polish Blimp," Dobey growled, "Then just who the hell can you work with? You've run through 3 partners in as many days."

Starsky shook his head miserably. "I dunno." He coughed again. "This damn cold's giving me trouble."

"I hope that's all it is." Dobey gave him a long look. "Since you're that sick -- not to mention banged up -- I'm obviously not going to get any more work out of you today. You're excused for the afternoon on grounds of ill health. Go see a doctor, Starsky. Go on, get out of here." He trundled past to his office and slammed the door.

"Uhuh." Starsky edged toward the nearest desk and leaned on it, stiff with a generalized aching in every nerve. *Maybe that's a good idea...* He dragged himself out of the squadroom, down the stairs, off to his car. He pulled the Torino out of the garage at an uncharacteristically sedate pace.

Out on the road, though, he had a better idea. He wasn't hurt that badly; the pain was a lot less now that he was out of the office. Besides, no doctor could cure the common cold. He'd do better with a leisurely beer and a decent meal. He changed course and headed for The Pits.

At the door of Huggy Bear's eating-and-drinking establishment, his nerve faltered. Starsky remembered the last time he'd been here, nearly two weeks before. The memory wasn't pleasant.

We sat on those bar-stools, right over there...

They'd been trying to pretend everything was normal, back to business as usual, unchanged. A lie. Over the third beer they'd almost convinced themselves that it was true. Huggy had related some interesting bit of gossip about a local pickpocket who'd taken a fishing holiday and wound up with a fish-hook in his business-thumb. Starsky had countered with the tale of the last time he and Hutch had gone fishing, and how it took two of them on one rod to haul the damn fish in. They'd swapped jokes, ending with the classic line about The One That Got Away. Hutch had cracked up laughing, reached over and playfully pounded Starsky's back--

--And I pulled away. Fast. Glared at him...

Two eye-searing images remained: Hutch catching that look and flinching as if he'd been burned, shamed, eyes going dark with pain, pulling his arm back to his lap and turning his attention quickly to his beer-mug -- and Huggy staring at the two of them as if they'd both grown antlers.

Never explained to Huggy. Hope he's forgotten...

Starsky's neglected stomach urged him forward. He went into The Pits and sat down on the same bar-stool.

The lunch crowd had cleared out and the place was deserted, but Huggy was there behind the bar, as usual. "Hello, my man," he hailed. "What'll it be today?"

"A beer, for starts." Starsky winced as the pain in his lip began clamoring for attention. "Maybe a shot with it." *On an empty stomach? Tsk. It'll wash out the cut. Eat later...*

"Rocket-feul this early in the day?" Huggy drew a mug of draft, followed it with a shot of house bourbon, and peered thoughtfully at his customer. "How you get the fat lip?"

"What, 's it fat already?" Starsky took a mouthful of the bourbon, swirling it around the cut. The antiseptic sting wasn't too bad. "Hadda slight disagreement with an extra-large size Polack. Heh! Never wisecrack at a guy with Size 12 fists." He pulled two dollars out of his wallet and set them on the counter.

Huggy swept the bills deftly into the cash register and turned back in a single motion. Bartender's ballet. "Where's Hutch?"

Starsky choked on the bourbon. It took several coughs to get his windpipe clear. "Whew! You weren't kidding when you called that stuff rocket-feul!" he sidetracked.

"Toldja it was early in the day for this stuff." Huggy set both palms firmly on the bar. "So, where's Hutch?"

Shit. Persistent. I'm going to have to tell him... Starsky finished off the last of the shot, avoiding Huggy's eyes. "He's quit," he finally said.

Huggy stared at him. "Quit? Quit the force?"

"Yeah." Starsky closed his fingers around his beer-mug and circled it slowly on the bar. "He's leaving today."

"Why?" There was nothing excited about the question, nothing even surprised: just an unquestionable demand. "What happened?"

Shit! Shit!! Shit!!! It's nobody's goddam business! "He...just couldn't take it anymore. Something snapped. He's gone..." --over the edge.

"So why didn't you go after him?"

"I can't!" Starsky snapped his head up, wondering how much Huggy knew. "He- he wants to...do something...different. I can't do that. So..." He shrugged briefly.

"So you're breakin' up a 7-year partnership?" Huggy's eyes burned down on him.

Starsky bit his lip, and was instantly sorry for it. He nodded.

Huggy leaned toward him across the bar. "This got anything to do with the way you two been actin' since the Gunther case?"

Starsky flinched. "Wh-whatcha mean, been actin'?"

"Come off it, Starsky." Huggy's face resembled a hanging-judge's. "I've

known you guys for years, an' I didn't get to be such a fine source of information by bein' slow on the uptake. You think I haven't seen the way you two been walkin' around each other on tiptoe? Somethin's really wrong between you two, ever since you got outta the hospital. An' now you tell me Hutch's quit-
tin' the force, and you think I don't see a connection?"

Seeing too much! "Quit prying, Hug! It's personal. Leave it alone."
Starsky hid his face behind a quick gulp of beer.

"Personal, my ass." Huggy glared at him like an interrogator's lamp.
"You think I ain't involved? Who the hell do you think was holdin' his head for him when you were lyin' in the hospital, shot full of holes, an' Hutch was runnin' around half-crazy tryin' to get the bastards that did it?"

"Half-crazy...?" Starsky looked up. *He said it happened then. That's when it changed, when he knew--*

"Guess you didn't hear about that, huh? Well, let this man tell you it was really somethin' to see. You should've seen his face that time in the elevator, when he was so goddam sure you were gonna die. You should've seen the way he busted all the speed-limits drivin' down there when it looked like they were gonna lose you for sure. You should've seen him lean against that window an' cry, after your heart stopped an' they had the devil's own time gettin' it started again."

"H-heart stopped?" Starsky went cold all over. *I was dead?*

"You didn't know 'bout that, either, huh? Yeah, your heart stopped. You was legally dead for two minutes. He came runnin' in just after they finally got you started again, and he just leaned against the glass an' cried, an' he didn't care who saw him."

Starsky didn't say anything. Couldn't. He stared up into the unrelenting dark eyes and trembled like the ground in an earthquake. The description was so sharp, so damned believable, he could see it like a true memory. He could see Hutch crying like that at his death. He could see himself, if it had been Hutch.

"Y'know, it took 'em three jolts with the shocker to get your heart started again. The doc said he didn't know how the hell you were still alive. An' Hutch damn-near fainted. Then he went out an' tore through Gunther's mob like a wreckin' machine, brought that big rich son of a bitch back in cuffs an' his shirtsleeves, brought that whole playhouse down single-handed, like Samson wreckin' the temple. An' all for you."

Starsky struggled to breathe. The pain in his throat was strangling him, a blazing star of anguish with three attendant comets: the bullet-scars across his chest. He clamped his hand around the beer-mug until the knuckles turned white, and then remembered when he'd last seen that done. *Hutch, for god's sake!*

"An' how'd you treat him afterwards? I seen you, actin' like he had leprosy or somethin' -- keepin' your distance like he had the goddam plague. Real grateful of you, Starsky! What'sa matter? He have the bad taste to get tears all over your nice, clean bandages? Jesus, I really like the way you pay your debts! God only knows why that poor son of a bitch loves you, but I'd like to know why the hell you repay him by kickin' him in the guts!"

"It's the wrong kinda love, goddammit!" Starsky's voice burst free, half an octave higher than normal. "Can't you understand? He turned queer on me!" Oh god no I didn't want to say it now I'm going to have to-- "Yeah, he went crazy, all right: crazy in love! Over the edge! He told me about it, the day I got outta the hospital; sat there on his sofa and told me flat out that he'd gone queer for me. For me! Told me-- God almighty, can't you understand? That's why I hadda keep away from him, keep my distance, keep safe limits. He fuckin' wants my ass!" Oh god oh god Hutch why the hell did you have to change have to make it all crazy dangerous sick perverted goddam queer-- Not me! Not me!

Huggy didn't even blink. "Beats gettin' shot, don't it?"

Starsky grunted as if he'd been punched in the gut. "Whuh...what...?"

"I said it beats gettin' shot. It beats dyin'." Huggy glared down at him like a baleful hunter's moon. "You're old enough to know that if there really is a Fate Worse'n Death, a little offbeat screwin' doesn't make it. What's sex, Starsky? You can get it from your sweetheart, from the hooker down the street, or from your own right hand -- maybe left, in your case. Big fuckin' deal! That's worth throwin' Hutch away for?"

"You threw away your partner"... Is that how it looks? To everybody? What if-- "What the hell's the matter with you, Hug?! He's gone goddam perverted, an' you think I oughtta humor him for godsake?! Act like it's fuckin' harmless?!?"

"What the christ are you bein' so simon-pure about?" Huggy snarled. His hands were shaking on the bar. "You think you're some kinda holy virgin, just because you never done it That Way? Bullshit, Starsky! If you ever so much as beat off, you've done it with a man. You ever think about that?"

"It isn't the same goddam thing! It's-- This-- That's harmless, an' this sure as hell isn't!" For godsake, he wants to fuck me! Ram it in, tear, split--

"Worse'n bullets?" Huggy stared directly at Starsky's jacketed chest, where the assassins' shots had gone. "You been willin' to take lead for Hutch, an' him for you, hunnerds of times. You wanta get right down to it, Starsky, you already got raped through the guts by three big fat bullets. You ain't no virgin to gettin' things rammed into you. What's a little ol' piece of cock after that? 'Specially if it'd save your best buddy, keep you from losin' him."

"Uh..." Starsky floundered, caught by that crazy lost-in-the-dark dizziness again. The words stirred wild images: bullet-slugs like squat gray cocks, running him through, killing him. "No," was all he could say. "No..."

"You stupid asshole!" Huggy's eyes, incredibly, glittered with tears. "Hutch was my friend too, y'know. It's my friend you're throwin' away with your goddam Purity act. Get him the hell back!"

"C-can't!" I can't do that it'll ruin me I'll turn into one of them-- Like Hutch! "Run, Jack." "Flaming faggots." "You'd be happy to throw me into the fire, wouldn't you?" Threw him away to fall into the dark alone... "No!"

"Damn you!" Huggy whirled around, punched the cash-register, hauled out the last two dollar bills and slapped them down on the bar. Then he yanked the

glass out of Starsky's hand and threw the beer right in his face.

Starsky gaped at him, too stunned to react.

"Get outta here!" Huggy raged at him. "You bigotted asshole coward, get the hell outta my bar! Don't you come back in here without him!"

Starsky almost fell off the bar-stool. His legs felt numb, mind whirling. Ignoring the bills still lying on the bar, he stumbled his way toward the smear of grayish light that was the front door. All he could think was that he had to get back to his car. He'd be safe there.

Huggy turned back to the cash-register, grabbed the nearest towel and rubbed it across his streaming eyes. Angie came out from the back and asked what all the noise and mess was about. Huggy said to shut up and clean off the bar, and went on rubbing his eyes.

* * *

*Help, I'm a rock! Help, I'm a rock!
Gee, it's a drag being a rock. Maybe if I were a cop...*

The radio sang, unnoticed, as Starsky dropped into the Torino's front seat, pulled the door shut behind him and thumbed the lock down. He didn't bother rolling down the windows, though the heat trapped under the darkening gray cloud-deck had turned the air into a steam-bath. He reached numbly for a bandana and began lethargically drying off his face, neck, hair. After awhile he realized that his hands were cold, and shaking so badly that they could barely maneuver the cloth.

He's leaving today. Starsky stared into the lead-gray sky. Maybe he's already gone. I'm losing everything.

*Help, I'm a cop! Help, I'm a cop!
It's such a drag being a cop...*

Under the thick clouds the city looked pale, leached, unreal. Everything moved slowly, cars and people and occasional animals, like zombies commanded to meaningless tasks by sorcerers who had forgotten them.

Empty. The whole world's gone colorless and dead and empty...

Starsky felt the pain rising, swelling like an iron bubble inside him. He couldn't raise the energy to cough it away this time. Instead he opened his jacket and looked down through the torn shirt-front at the three livid scars on his chest. He touched them with spread fingers. They were hard and glassy. Unfeeling.

"Beats gettin' shot, don't it?"

The pain soared, blinding him. He groaned under it, and the sound got away from him, bursting free in a choked howl. Tears followed, burning. He knew what was happening, and couldn't stop it.

What the hell does it matter, anyway? Nothing matters! I'm losing him, and the whole world's turned gray and empty and cruddy, and everything hurts.

Sobs broke out of him, harsh as dull explosions, tearing him. He pressed one hand over his streaming eyes, the other across his mouth, and rested his forehead against the steering wheel. He could feel the bullet-scars pulling every time his chest heaved. Scar-tissue: rigid, unfeeling.

Oh god, I can't lose him! I can't!

He sat slumped behind the wheel, crying helplessly. The sky darkened further, and the first warning flickers of lightning raced across the cloud-deck. The radio sang on, ignored.

No pill gonna cure my ill.

I got a bad case of loving you.

Finally his eyes cleared enough to let him see the street ahead. There was a public phone at the intersection. Scarcely thinking of what he was going to say, Starsky clambered out of the Torino and half-staggered toward the phone. His feet had trouble feeling the pavement, as if his sense of touch were in revolt. Shaking fingers dialed Hutch's number. A dozen rings brought no answer. Starsky hung up the receiver and looked blankly around him. Nothing made sense.

If he hasn't left yet, why the hell doesn't he answer his phone? Everything else accounted for: last paycheck drawn, bills all paid, movers called...

...But I don't recall that he turned in his gun...

A hideously-possible answer flickered across Starsky's mind with the first roll of thunder. He could almost see Hutch sitting on that same sofa, surrounded by full packing-boxes, quietly taking out his Python. Studying it. Loading it. Turning it around. On himself.

God please no!!!

Caught up in horror, Starsky raced back to the Torino and slammed into the seat. The first fat drops of rain pattered the windshield as he jammed the key into the ignition and turned it hard over. The car roared to life, and he wheeled it out of the parking space and gunned it up the road toward Venice.

"Wait for me, wait for me," trilled a soapy '50s rock-song on the radio.

Starsky grabbed the offending machine, intending to heave it out the window. Then he remembered that Hutch had given it to him. He yanked the strap across his shoulder and sped on.

The clouds burst altogether as he swung toward Venice Place, suddenly drowning the road. The windshield wipers, even at top speed, couldn't keep visibility clear. The world went gray-dark, turning on the streetlights prematurely. The Torino skidded badly around a flooded intersection, and Starsky was forced to slow down.

Not now! Not when every second counts...when it might already be too late--

He half-sobbed obscenities at the draining sky and pleas to the laboring engine, and drove on as fast as he dared, wheels throwing up walls of spray to either side. Starsky picked his course by the dull glow of streetlights; signposts and landmarks were almost invisible in the gray curtains of rushing water. Halfway up Venice Place he realized that half the visibility trouble was in his own eyes. He rubbed them clear and raced on through water up to the hubcaps.

Stop that! Can't afford tears now; I've got to see to drive!

The tears stopped as if on command.

Hold on. Baby, hold on,
'Cause help is on the way.

Tomorrow's not the same as today, the radio cried for him.

Wait for me, Hutch! For godsake wait until I get there! It's not over yet. There's so much I gotta say to you. Please...

Outside your door he is waiting, waiting for you.
Sooner or later you know he's got to come through.
Who do you lean on when nobody's there?
Who do you turn to in need or in despair?

Please wait! Don't leave me! Swear to god, Hutch, I've changed my mind!
I've changed...

Hold on. Baby, hold on,
'Cause you're standing on the brink,
And it's closer than you think.
Hold on...

The water was creeping up over the canal bank when Starsky wheeled up into the driveway and threw on the brakes. He yanked out the key and almost fell out of the Torino into what felt like the heart of a waterfall. He noticed only that Hutch's beat-up LTD was still in the driveway.

He's still here. Dead or alive?! Please, god--

Starsky wrenched open the front door and pounded up the stairs, the radio bouncing on his hip. The apartment door barred his way. Shut. Silent. Without pausing an instant, Starsky threw his full weight against it.

The latch gave way with a tearing crash, and he fell flat on the polished wood floor. He gulped air and looked up.

Where is he? Where-- Sofa.

Hutch was sitting slumped on the couch, face just raised from his hands, staring at Starsky with eyes as wet and reddened as his own.

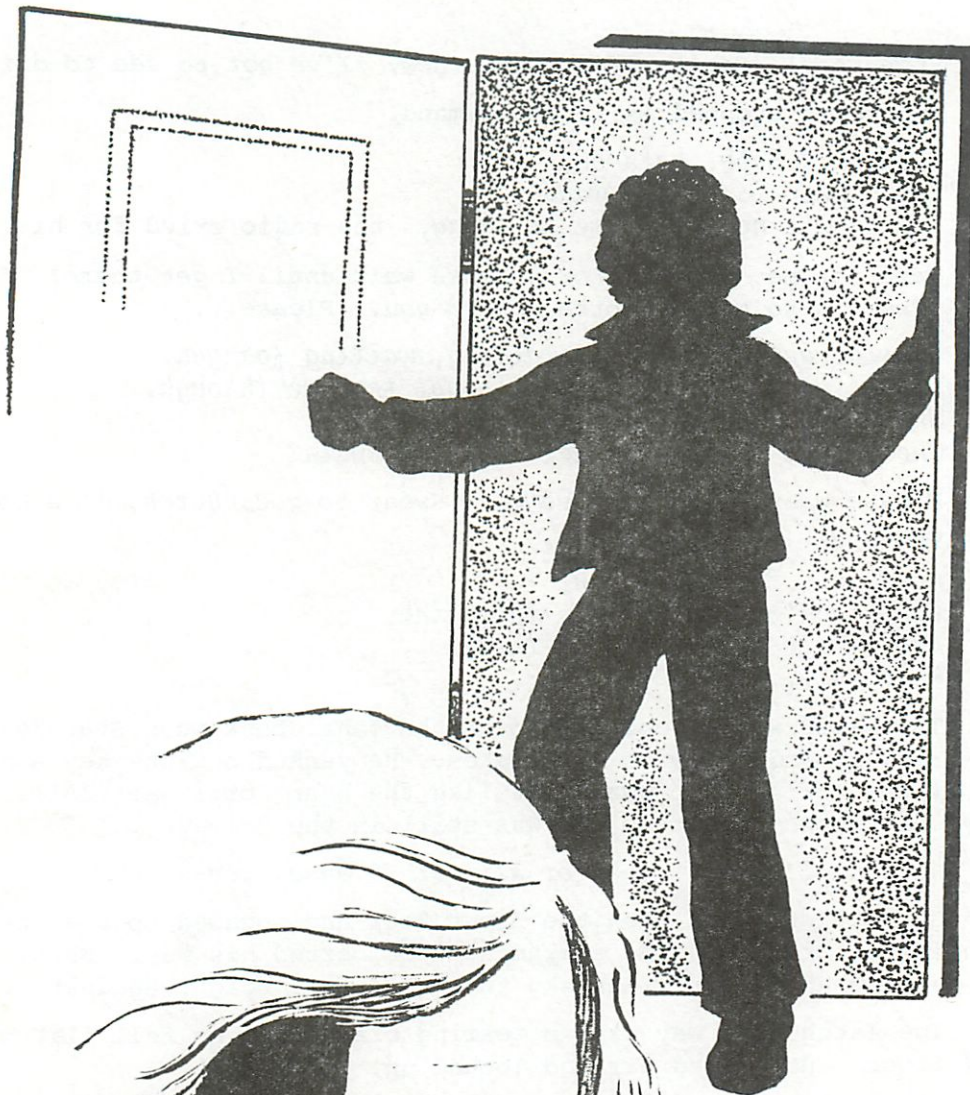
* * *

"Captain, I'm not going to apologize." Irish stood like a rock before Dobey's desk, hands gripped behind him. Classic 'parade rest' position. Unmoveable. "Starsky made one bigotted comment too many, and when I called him on it, he aimed a punch at me, so I hit back. I admit I blew my top, but I had plenty of provocation."

Dobey studied him without comment.

The silence worked; Irish figetted, then went on. "I know, I know; a cop shouldn't let himself get provoked. Well, I did hold out...at least, until he swung."

"What sort of bigotted comment?" Dobey asked.



"Anti-Gay stuff. I had to listen to it all morning, and then..." Irish frowned, and changed directions. "Captain, you know how I am. If Starsky's that hung up about it, why did you send him with me? And why on the Basher case?"

Dobey smiled, quivering a little, as if he were holding back far more. "I had reason to believe that Starsky needed some...educating," he said.

Irish's frown deepened, puzzled. "Well, I don't think it worked..."

"On the contrary," Dobby grinned widely. "I suspect it worked very well, after all. You're dismissed; go back to work."

* * *

"You're alive," Starsky whispered.

Hutch nodded vaguely, still staring at him. He was, Starsky noted, surrounded by filled packing-cartons. The hifi was still out, and there was a lone record on the turntable. The Python, quietly sheathed in its holster, sat on the end-table -- safely out of reach.

I came in time. Trembling with relief, Starsky climbed to his feet. *So now what do I do? What do I say? ...No. How do I say it?*

Hutch swallowed visibly and laced his fingers together. His eyes darted around the room like hunted animals, fixed on the doorway. "You...broke my door," he managed.

Starsky turned and looked. "Just the one lock." He pushed the door shut and put up the chain. "I'll get it fixed." He walked over to the sofa, close as he dared, and looked down. "...Why didn'tcha answer your phone?"

"I...didn't want to talk to anybody." Hutch set his hands on his knees, swallowed hard again, and made himself look up. He was shaking.

Scared. Of me, Starsky realized, with a fresh stab of pain. *Does he think I'd hit him? ...Or maybe he knows I guessed what he was planning...* That gave him the words he needed. "Don't do it, Babe." His voice felt rusty, unused to being gentle.

"Don't...?" Hutch puzzled. "Don't...go?"

Okay, Hutch. If you want to play it this way, I won't mention that either. Just what's...admissible. "That's what I mean."

"Ah, Starsk..." Hutch squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "We went through this before, 3 days ago. I've got to leave. Clean break. Get out of your life..."

"Stop it." Starsky dropped to one knee and grabbed him by both wrists. Hutch flinched, then stared at his tight-gripped arms. Starsky could read the thought. *Yeah. First time in weeks I've dared to touch you.* He kept his hold tight. "Look, I've changed my mind. Okay? I don't wantcha to go, Hutch. I-- I've been thinkin' about it these past few days, and...and..." He floundered as the words ran out. "Ah, don't go, Babe. Please."

Hutch slowly looked up at his face, eyes wide with disbelief warring with

with hope. "You can't mean that."

"I mean it!" *How the hell do I get through to you?!* "Why the fuck else d'ya think I came runnin' up here, knockin' your door down? 'Cause I thought you were-- you were gonna...leave me, an' I'd n-never see you again..."

Hutch only stared at him, stalled on accepting all this. He took momentary refuge in irrelevant details. "Your face is all bruised up."

"Yeah." Starsky grinned, understanding him perfectly. "I got into a... little disagreement with Irish."

"With Irish?!" Hutch did a classic double-take. "How the christ did you get under that thick Polish skin?"

"Uh..." *No, better save that for later.* "I didn't try to. Honest. I guess he just didn't like my sense of humor."

"Oh Jesus." Hutch couldn't help laughing.

"Guess you're the only guy on the force who can put up with me. You're the only one I can work with, the only partner I got. Please, Hutch..."

Hauled back to the main problem, Hutch winced away. "Dammit, Starsky! You don't know how much I want to, but it wouldn't work! We tried for nearly two months, and it was a nightmare. What the hell would it be if we tried it again?"

"Better. I promise."

"It wouldn't be the same, never be like it was..." Hutch dropped his eyes. "I-- I can't take the words back. You know, we both know, and it'd always be there between us. ...Wish to god I'd never told you."

"Hutch--" Starsky transferred his grip to Hutch's shoulders, squeezed hard, shook him. "Look at me, dammit! I'm not scared of you anymore!!"

He stopped right there, shocked by his own words. *Migod, that's true! I was scared of him...and I'm not now...*

Hutch blinked at him, astonished. "Scared...? Starsk, what did you think I'd do to you, anyway?"

Given the bald question, Starsky didn't know what to answer. "I...dunno. Hurt me, I guess..." *Fuck me. Stick it into me...* He felt the bullet-scars ache. Ugly pictures danced in his mind, but somehow he couldn't fit Hutch's face among them. The images faded, leaving the sharp memory of Huggy's accusing stare. *No matter how bad it gets, it still beats getting shot. I've taken worse pain, worse damage, for less goddam cause.*

"I wouldn't hurt you," Hutch whispered. "Couldn't."

"Okay, so I got nothing to be scared of." Starsky kept his voice cheerful, but a cold trickle of fear in his belly called him liar. He clenched his teeth and fists, and defied it. "So you don't hafta go. So don't."

Hutch shook his head again, wearily. "It's kind of late for this. I've got my transfer in and made. They're waiting for me in Oregon."

"You were going to fucking Oregon?! Aw come on, you'd die of boredom up there, and you know it!"

"All the damn paperwork--"

"To hell with the paperwork! Call Dobey and tell him you changed your mind, an' you're staying. He'll holler his head off about the paper-crap, but he'll be pleased as punch to get you back. Let the damn clerks worry about the papers; that's what they're paid for."

"They'll call me nasty names in Oregon..."

"Let 'em. Whatta we care here?"

"Where'll I live? I've cut the lease on this place, got to be out by tomorrow. The movers are coming today...unless this storm holds them up until morning."

Starsky took a deep breath and made the plunge. "You could always stay with me."

Hutch stared at him, jaw dropping. "You can't mean that!" he said again.

"I mean it." Starsky struggled to keep a brave grin on his face. "Said I wasn't scared of you, didn't I?"

"Jesus..." Hutch ran his hands through his hair, rumpling it to a ragged halo. "Starsky, this is too crazy. You're building castles in the air. It won't fucking work! I-- Never mind how much I want to believe it, want to-- I'd still want to-- Starsky, even if you're not scared, I am!"

"Scared of what?" *For godsake, I'm the one who's gonna get--*

"Wanting you." Hutch locked his hands together and pressed them against his mouth. "I'd still feel it," he mumbled. "Being so close... I can't guarantee that it wouldn't drive me up the walls, in time. Easier to cut my heart out and walk away."

Starsky took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The storm-dark shadows filled the room, stalking him. *So it comes down to that, no matter what I do. "Beats getting shot"... How bad can it be?* "Okay," he said, climbing to his feet. "Okay..."

He looked around the room, noted a box marked 'bedding', went to it and pried the top open. There was a folded quilt on top. Good. He pulled it out, shook it free of folds and cast it like a net onto the floor at Hutch's feet. He pulled off his jacket and the last rags of his shirt. The radio came off with them, and he thoughtfully turned up the volume. The heavy strains of "I-Na-Gadda-Davida" purred through the stripped room. He kicked off his shoes.

"Starsky," Hutch's voice quavered. "What're you doing?"

Starsky dropped to his knees on the quilt in front of Hutch, hoping to god that the fluttery shivering he felt in his whole body didn't show. "Babe, you asked me...last time I saw you...if I was willing to try it, even once. I wasn't, then. Now I am." *Please don't let my voice crack. Said I wasn't scared. Gotta prove it, be brave...*

Hutch started to say something, couldn't get it out. He pressed his joined fists against his mouth, shaking so hard that his edges seemed to blur. Abruptly, his hands sprang wide and he hid his face in them. His shoulders heaved in explosive sobs.

Starsky scrambled up on the couch beside Hutch and wrapped his arms around him, held tight, rocked him, drained the heavy shaking into his own body. "Aw Babe...it's all right...don't cry...you don't hafta-- hafta be scared, or anything. Please, Hutch..."

Hutch reached for him blindly, clung, cried harder.

The way it used to be, Starsky thought, hanging on. Just like old times... old bad times. Why is it, back when this was innocent, the only way we could touch each other was in pain like this, or for a joke? Something wrong there... It's supposed to be wrong now, going to be wrong, but I'll do it anyway... Oh, break the goddam barrier, fall over the edge, and you can do anything! He shivered on his own account, shaken by the dizziness and the dark again, now acutely aware of Hutch's arms and hands on his bare back. Well, at least we'll fall together! Not alone!

"Starsk...ah, christ..." Hutch finally calmed to the point of coherence. "I can't do that to you...make you into something you're not, never can be..."

He's backing out? Big buildup to an awful letdown? I get off scot-free after all? ...No, too good to hope. Test. "Y-you mean you don't want me anymore?"

"Want you?" Hutch's voice trembled, fingers biting noticeably into the muscles of Starsky's back. "Migod, I want you so much it hurts! Just this much touching... Dammit, even before the-- the other pain stopped, I felt-- It feels so damn good just holding you-- Christ!" He yanked his hands off Starsky as if they were burned, pulled away, clutched the inside of his thigh close to the groin.

Starsky shuddered, understanding. Too good to be true. He'd have to go through with it. He slid off the couch, back onto the quilt. His heart thudded as if trying to escape his chest. Attempted break-out through the bullet-scars. The air felt chill on his skin where Hutch's hands had rested.

"Okay," he said, trying like hell to keep his voice light and easy. "So what do you want, Hutch? My ass?" He felt very cold.

"No..." Hutch whispered, looking at him.

What's that leave? Blowjob? Starsky gagged at the thought.

"...I want to kiss you."

Starsky gaped at him. And that's all? All this blood-sweating misery, just for a kiss?! There's got to be more to it than that!

As if the thought had conjured it, there was. "I want to hold you...wrap you up in my arms..." Hutch seemed to be looking through him. "Touch you all over, with all of my body...as if I could take off my skin and wrap it around you...make a magic cloak that would turn away bullets, all danger...keep you safe..." He looked down at his hands as if wondering what to do with them. "Crazy, huh?"

"No..." In an eerie, wordless way that made perfect sense. Starsky swallowed an incipient lump in his throat and made himself take the next step. "And after that?" he rasped.

"I don't know." Hutch gave him a quick, apologetic smile. "I've never

gotten that far; I don't know what I'd want afterwards."

"But-but-- You must've thought about it, dreamed-- I thought you'd done it all kindsa ways! You told me you'd done this before, and that's why your family didn't want you back!"

"I lied." Hutch looked away. "The most I've ever done was a common-or-garden variety circle-jerk, with a bunch of other boy-scouts, when I was 13."

Starsky smothered a hysterical giggle, trying to picture that. *Boy scouts! Rub two sticks together to start a fire... Oh, god damn!*

"I left home because I got tired of my old man's belting me, that's all."

That's all?! "Then why the hell did you tell me-- Hutch, why wouldja say such a thing about yourself?!"

"To...make it easier...for you...to let me go." Hutch looked down at his hands again.

Starsky opened his mouth, couldn't think of anything to say, shut it again. He was shaken by the magnitude of what he'd almost lost, couldn't lose. "Then we're b-both...virgins...to this?"

"Looks like."

All right. Maybe it's really nothing more than some hugging and kissing after all. Maybe nothing worse than some harmless jerking off. I can stand that. I can stand worse if he really wants it. Beats getting shot... "Okay." Starsky reached up with thankfully-steady hands. Took Hutch by the wrists again, tugged, pulled him gently off the couch. "So we start there."

Hutch dropped to his knees on the quilt, clumsy with indecision. "Babe, are you sure you-- Do you really know what you're getting into?"

The comeback to that was so obvious that Starsky snapped it off without thinking. "Yeah: you!" *Oh goddam, goddam, I didn't mean that!*

Hutch gulped, but didn't pull away. "Is that...how you want to do it?"

"No," Starsky whispered, cheeks flaming. For an instant he could almost see himself throwing Hutch down, ramming into him. He shuddered. "I don't wanta hurt you, either." Impulse guided him right this time; he reached up and gripped Hutch by the shoulders.

Hutch closed his eyes, sighed as if an invisible weight had rolled off him, and almost drifted into the embrace. His hands rose slowly, gingerly, and settled as light as falling leaves on Starsky's back. "I love you, you know," he whispered.

"I know it." With equal care Starsky let his hands slide past each other, made an overlapping ring of solid flesh to keep Hutch from slipping away. It felt surprisingly good. *Don't let him go...I can stand this...not bad yet... not bad at all...*

By slow, shy degrees Hutch leaned against his partner until they were pressed tight, only the layers of cloth between them. He turned his head slightly and kissed Starsky's neck, the barest brushing of lips.

Starsky shivered again, not with cold. *Soft as a woman's...* So what was I expecting? *That he'd have bones in it? Stupid...* Only difference is the

moustache. He couldn't help giggling. "Your moustache tickles!"

Hutch squeezed him gently, chuckling. "Told you there was good use for the Hairy Caterpillar." A little bolder, he traced slow kisses over Starsky's jaw and cheek, up to one eye and across to the other, down the other cheek to his chin, back to his neck. One hand stole up to burrow softly in the thick curls.

Starsky shut his eyes. His skin had turned so sensitive that it frightened him. Every touch seemed to echo subtly through his whole body. *Feels so good it's scary... What's the matter with me? How'd my...my volume get turned up so far?* He was shivering heavily, but the sense of crawling cold was utterly gone. He felt Hutch's other hand rub slow, gentle circles on his back, and it was as if no one had ever done that to him before, as if he truly were a virgin again. The lean, warm body in his arms felt incredibly solid and alive beneath the thin cloth. He caught himself wishing the shirt were gone, out of the way, so he could touch that smooth skin and see if it were velvety or silky against his own. *What the hell's happening to me?!*

"...Love you so..." Hutch whispered, nuzzling Starsky's ear and then down the sharp line of his throat.

So goddam gentle... Starsky reeled under that light, slow touch. *Wasn't expecting this. What did I expect?* He couldn't remember. It was growing difficult to think. The soft touches, like an almost-subliminal tickle, were making him restless, itchy. He squirmed, trying to shake off the velvety riffling of his nerves, and pressed tighter against Hutch in simple need of something solid to feel. He could almost hear the heavy slugging of his partner's heart, felt the shirt-buttons grinding cruelly against his chest and belly. Hutch groaned quietly, slid his hand out of Starsky's hair and down his neck to join in the slow caresses up and down his back. Starsky sagged against him, panting, feeling the strange bubbly tickling steal through his blood with every gentle stroke. *I think I'm being seduced!* he marvelled. *And he hasn't even really kissed me yet!*

Hutch drew a sharp breath, ran his hands down to Starsky's waist and held him a few inches away, letting the air slip chill between their bellies. "Tell me," he grated, "Tell me right away if anything hurts. Tell me, and I'll stop."

"Kay," Starsky whispered. "Not yet, anyway." It occurred to him that getting hurt might not be the only danger. He didn't know what to make of his own reactions, but they were wreaking havoc with his self-control, doing something wierd to his nerves and brain. He sagged against Hutch, needed the support. Their thighs and bellies collided. He felt something move behind the layers of denim, realized what it was, trembled.

Here it comes. Not long now... He's only just getting turned on? How goddam long is this going to take?! Can't stand too much-- Get it over with! Desperate, he gripped Hutch's shirt and pulled it free of his jeans. *Hurry up! Hurry! Before I...* His hands burrowed between their chests and fumbled with the buttons.

Hutch gasped, pulled back enough to give him room, and unfastened his cuffs. Together they dragged the shirt away. There was a T-shirt under that. Starsky's hands shook as he pulled it free. Hutch tossed away the bundled

shirts and raked his hands through his hair, letting it float free on the heavy air in a pale and ragged aureolus.

In that moment Starsky took a thorough look at him. Lean shoulders, clear and level collar-bones, almost-delicate chest, flat and hairless belly, sharp bones and clean muscles rippling under the pearly skin, nipples like rose-amber medallions. *He looks good*, Starsky admitted, ignoring the inexplicable hot shiver that went over him like a breath of desert wind. *He looks damn good. I never exactly noticed before, never looked at him quite this way...*

Then the long arms came up and encircled him again, drawing him against bare skin that was startlingly warm, smooth, smelled of soap and clean sweat and a hint of wood-ashes. Abruptly dizzy, Starsky fell against him, gripped for support. He felt the hard muscles like a moving rope ladder under his hands. *He feels good! This feels...* He felt, heard, the crisp curls on his chest being crushed against that smooth skin, imagined how that hair would feel to those rose-pale nipples and flat belly. An eerie sweet drunkenness swept through him, as if his blood had turned to champagne, and the flood of heat rushed him. This time it converged explosively in his groin, swelling him with impossible pressure and speed, making him throb and burn and want...

Omigod no! Not me!!

Panicked, Starsky pulled his arms back. Scrabbled for purchase on Hutch's shoulders and pushed him away, hard. He tumbled backwards, sprawled on the quilt, clutched his treacherously swollen cock as if to squeeze the blood back out of it.

Hutch fell back against the edge of the couch, chest heaving, eyes amazed, sweat lacquering his skin. "Starsk, what...how could I have hurt you? I wasn't near..."

Caught up in a cyclone of nameless feeling, Starsky was too dazed to lie. "You didn't hurt me!" he gasped.

"Then what...?"

"Can't you tell?!" *Stop playing so goddam innocent! You know what you did to me!* Starsky rolled to his knees, spread his thighs wide and pulled his hand away. "Look, damn you! Look!"

Hutch frowned puzzlement, stared, then recognized the giveaway bulge. His eyes changed, glanced down at himself to where the undisguised ridge of swollen flesh stretched the denim of his jeans. When he looked up, there was nothing gentle in his gaze. "You weren't expecting that, were you?"

"No!" Starsky tried to cling to his outrage, but felt it shredding under that icy glare, to leave nothing but shame. *If only this damn thing will go down...if only I can look away...if only...*

In the sudden silence, the music behind them rolled to its final chorus. The radio emitted meaningless chatter about the weather report, words distorted by the heavy rattle of the storm outside. Reality: thin veneer of civilized noise over rampaging forces of Nature. In the gray light Hutch's eyes seemed to glow balefully. Pale fire.

"What were you planning to do? Just suffer through it like a holy martyr?"

His voice cracked like thin ice. "Were you going to play Virgin Sacrifice with me cast as the Devil or somebody like him? Christ on a crutch, Starsky! Do you really think I wanted that?!"

"I-I didn't know what you wanted..." *But I had some ideas. Ugly ones.*

"Whatever it was, you meant to grin and bear it, right? No matter how much it hurt, or disgusted you, or whatever..."

"Y-yeah." *Couldn't hurt as much as getting shot! Or losing you...*

"And the one thing you didn't count on was that you just might enjoy it?"

"No." Starsky wrenched his eyes away, guessing how this looked, where it was leading.

"Yeahhhh..." The sound was a bitter, oddly-knowing snarl. "Real classic, Starsk. 'Take my body if you must, but you won't touch my Virtue'. Pain is the proof of holy Purity, and pleasure is Sinful. Right?"

Starsky clenched his hands on the quilt, on his slackening cock. He wouldn't have used quite those words, but he couldn't deny that the concept fit. He nodded his head once, jerkily.

"Isn't that a pretty damn Puritannical idea for a Jew-boy to swallow?"

Shocked, Starsky whipped his head up.

Bitter eyes met his, a bitterly wise half-smile. "I'm the one who grew up with that kind of crap, Starsky. Believe me, it's bullshit. I found that out the hard way. Take it to its logical conclusion, baby, and you wind up not even deserving to live! Take it from an ex-choirboy; only the dead are 100% Pure! The living are dirty, life is dirty, anything you like is dirty, and you have to suffer for it. You want to take it that far? Or do you want just half of a lethal dose?"

Right there, Starsky remembered Hutch's passing line about why he'd left his family. A big piece of a long-attempted jigsaw-puzzle fell into place. *That would explain so much about him!* "Hutch..." he breathed, his own turmoil forgotten in the blazing insight. "How bad did your old man belt you around for that harmless little boy-scout circle-jerk?"

Hutch blinked, jarred, then gave two syllables of a painful laugh. "Tou-ché, Starsky. He never found out about it, thank whatever gods there be. I lived in terror that he would -- for years, until I was old enough to get away from him. I took enough pain for other things to give me some idea..." He shivered, then shrugged it off.

"Awright." Starsky sat back on his heels, strangely calmed. He seemed to be in some cold, bright, high and quiet place, like a mountain top, where everything was suspended and nothing but reason could move, separated from knee-jerk and gut reactions of fear, shame, outrage, everything. "Just give me a minute to think." ...*Think. Yeah. Use those famous Jewish brains, Yid-kid. Analyze. What's all this Bible-bouncing Sunday-preacher hellfire howling to you? Pure bullshit. I don't swallow that stuff. So junk the pain-as-virtue crap, and what's left? What is there to all this queer-fear, anyway?*

Behind him, the radio resumed music: a heavy, thoughtful, meandering song against the steady sound of rain.

When the stranger came to town,
All the people watched in wonder,
In their tattered clothes gathered 'round
And raised their eyes up from the dead...

Look at it: all the snickering dirty words little boys passed around, all the bad jokes, half-mentioned threats... It all sinks into quicksand. Remember John Blaine. His death, investigating... What did we really see there? How many classic prancing fairies? Just the one old impersonator, who was tough as nails when push came to shove... And how many didn't fit the scare-picture at all? Not Blaine, god knows. Not those two dancers. Not Irish. Not Hutch, no...and not me. We don't have to be like that! We don't have to be 'like' anything! Starsky let go a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

And the stranger said to them:
"I have been upon the mountain.
I have witnessed forces, like cannons,
That can ram you to the ground."

So what's left to make it so damn scary, dirty, forbidden? The law? Ha. Ask a cop. ...So, 'custom and usage'? That can include a lot of garbage, like macrobiotic diets and TV commercials. Stupid fads. 'Popular' doesn't mean 'right'... And so much for 'what would the neighbors think', too. They don't have to know, and what's their opinion worth anyway? ...So what's left? Religion? Does it matter that much to me?

From the crowd a voice was heard:
"Should we get them before they get you?
Should we strike the first blow?"
He said: "No, no, no, you don't understand!"

Starsky had to stop and think carefully about that one. Okay, find an objection that's 100% Jewish. Play Talmudic scholar, and find one... He remembered a contemptuous Yiddish word from his New York childhood. "Faygeleh": "little bird". That's "Fairy" again, and I already did for that. He remembered unsubtle naggings from his mother. "Make lots of nice Jewish babies"... Hell, I already take flak for that, just being a bachelor. No different. A quote from Torah rose majestically to the surface, rumbling with the weight of millenia. "Thou shalt not lie with men as with women, for such is an abomination." Abomination. Right...

But then, so is eating bacon! --or pork chops, or shrimp cocktail, or beef tacos with sour cream, or veal parmigiana, or...

Is that all there is, at the finish? All that gut-reaction horror, trained into me for years, for so damn little?!

"The enemy is in your heart:
Self-respect robbed by self-rejecting.
Look around your country, at all the people
With the dreams dead in their hearts."

I would've thrown Hutch away, made myself miserable for life, just for that?
Stand up on your feet. Your life is short as hell.
You could be dead tomorrow. Today could be
Your last chance to believe in yourself,

*Your last chance to yell,
Your last chance to be good to yourself,
Your last chance to drink from life's well.
Drink from the well...*

Starsky laughed in a sudden explosion of freedom. He got up, reached for Hutch, wrapped his arms firmly around his startled partner's ribs and hugged him shamelessly. "It's all right, Babe. It's really okay."

Drink from the well!

Hutch sighed into Starsky's curls and slid hesitant hands around him. Starsky burrowed into the hollow of his shoulder, still marvelling at how good this felt. "If I can eat ham sandwiches," he murmured, "I can make love to you."

"Huh?"

"Just don't hurt me...if you can help it."

"I won't hurt you."

"An' try not to scare me too much."

"I'll try."

"Okay."

And then the warm arms were around him again, the sweet pressure of stroking hands and the soft touch of lips exploring his neck, cheeks, ears. Starsky sank willingly into the feeling, slid his hands cautiously on Hutch's bare back, seeking out the pattern of rolling muscle and buried bone beneath the silky soft skin. *God, how good he feels! How good...*

"Ah, Starsk..." Hutch whispered, pulling him close until their bodies were matched from throat to knee. He was trembling, muscles taut with restrained hunger, but his hands moved with exquisite tenderness and care. "...thought I'd never..."

"It's all right..." Starsky leaned against him, letting the flickering heat roll over them both. *So good...I'm not scared. How can he be so gentle with me after the way I treated him? ...'Cause he loves me, I guess...* Starsky closed his eyes on a fresh jolt of tears, and clung tight. The lengthening carresses on his back fell into cadence with his breathing, rocked him like a quiet sea, raised the soft heat in his blood and the tickling in his nerves by smooth and gradual degrees. *It's his gentleness doing it, he realized. Taking me... can't fight it...don't want to...want it... Nobody else to be gentle with! Nobody on Earth but him!*

He felt a stirring against his thigh: hard flesh lifting. *Yeah, here we go...* He shivered warmly, fearful and fascinated. *Get used to it. You're going to feel that thing, one way or another...*

Then Hutch nibbled his neck and slid warm hands in a single long stroke from shoulders to waist, and swayed against him. Starsky felt the whole length of his body rock against his partner's, long thighs against his thighs, smooth skin rubbing his belly, warm breath stirring his hair. Pulsing heat slammed into his cock, stiffening him. *And here I go, now. Don't be scared! Don't run! Don't leave him... Ah, get on with it! Too slow-- Flesh and blood can't*

take too much of this!

He gulped air as if diving into deep water, and reached for the waistband of Hutch's jeans.

Hutch froze, trembling. "Babe?" he whispered.

"Gettem off," Starsky insisted, tugging the recalcitrant zipper. "They're inna way."

"Let me..." Hutch drew away only far enough to slide his hands between them, and drew the zipper down. He slipped his thumbs under the top edge and peeled the cloth layers off, sliding them endlessly past his buttocks and thighs, reluctantly dropping to one side to get them past his knees.

My turn. Starsky set his attention to his own jeans, popped the snap free, pulled open the zipper and tugged the denim away. That left his briefs. He hesitated for a second, reluctant to shed his last scrap of body-armor, then resolutely pulled it off. He pushed the clothes away, sharply aware of the cool air on his bared ass, the weight of his engorged cock swinging free. He passed a quick scan over himself, wondering how he looked to Hutch. Too hairy? Veins too big on it? Don't put you off, do I? He dared to glance up.

Hutch sat on one hip, leaning on one arm. His other hand was on his cock, stroking it. His eyes were on Starsky, devouring him, hypnotized. "Christ, but you're beautiful," he whispered.

"Me?" Starsky squeaked, surprised. What about you, Babe? Look at yourself. All pale gold, coral-tipped... Is it bigger than mine? He made himself look at what had frightened him. Well, maybe a little longer, but not as thick. Long and thin, like the rest of him...clean and smooth and satiny... Not bad. If I have to...take that think in my mouth, I can breathe around it...maybe I won't choke. If I've got to take it up my-- up my ass, it might not hurt too much...won't split me...

"Yes, you." Hutch smiled, blushing. "You're trim as a racehorse. All woolly, like a little black lamb..." He reached forward and ran his fingers over Starsky's chest, making him quiver. "And you've got a gorgeous ass."

Guess you'll want that, eventually. Starsky managed a shakey smile. Just be careful, Babe...don't hurt... "Ah, is there any particular way you want to go about this?"

"Just come here and hold me." Hutch held out his arms.

Starsky slid into them, revelling in the feeling. Hutch pulled him sideways and they slipped down onto the quilt. They wriggled themselves around to lie stretched out on the smooth cloth, and Starsky found himself looking up into impossibly bright crystal-blue eyes. "Feel okay?" Hutch asked him.

"More than okay," Starsky grinned. "You're warm as toast." He rolled toward Hutch and snuggled against his chest, wrapped up in the smooth arms. For the first time, this seemed right and natural and familiar. Lean arms around him, warm flesh blanketting his body, the soft pull of steady breathing and the deep thudding heartbeat: he could be happy lying like this forever, except for the insistent throbbing of his cock. He knew he'd have to deal with that, sooner or later. Nervous virgin, he chided himself.



Hutch leaned closer, kissed him between the eyes. His thigh slid over Starsky's, brushing his sensitized cock, making him jump. "You all right?"

"Oh yeah... Just go slow, okay? 'M not exactly used to this."

"Me neither. We'll just have to feel our way along."

Starsky smothered an explosive giggle-fit against Hutch's neck.

"I mean, do what comes naturally, joker." Hutch grinned hugely, running his fingers through the dark fleece on Starsky's chest and belly, watching the reaction. "You like that?"

"Yeah...oh yeah..." So good...so far. Okay, enjoy it while it lasts... Starsky stretched out, arching toward the caressing hand.

Hutch smiled hopefully, stroked further, shyly explored the willing body beside him. His fingers whispered through crisp curls, glided over broad ribs and shifting muscles, slid boldly down one thigh and then back up to curve around the narrow circle of Starsky's waist. Starsky squirmed under that surveying touch, breathing a little deeper, faster. Encouraged, Hutch pressed slow kisses to the curly dark hair, damp forehead, ears, nose and closed long-lashed eyes. He petted across Starsky's broad chest, fingertips rippling over the white scars and gold-tan nipples. "Beautiful," he repeated softly.

Starsky groaned and quivered helplessly under that slow touch, struggling to think, amazed at himself. Dear god it feels so good...touching so gentle and slow, like...like making love to a woman. As if...that's the only way he knows how to do it. Slow and careful and... I never felt it like this before. Strange...and so damn good...find out what it's like...be on the receiving end for a change...

He knew he should have been frightened by that idea, was a little annoyed that he wasn't. Then even that melted away in joy and wonder. Is this how he did it with Kyra? Gillian? ...My Terry, Rosie...did I do it right for them? Will he do it that good for me? Repayment... He shaped a half-coherent prayer to some vaguely-conceived god of justice, karma. If I was ever good with a woman, let it be that good for me now. I don't want to be hurt, don't want him to hurt me...not like this... He wants to make me happy. Please let him!

Then that thoughtful hand slid down his belly all the way to his groin, closed softly on his pulsing cock, stroking, exploring, igniting him. Starsky groaned, writhed under that touch, mind flaring white-hot at the feel of it. Soaring pleasure overloaded his nerves, spilled over, swamped his mind. Between one instant and the next, the world changed; he was floating in a universe of soft fire, knowing hands stroking the liquid heat into his skin, his blood, his nerves, until his whole body surged in a single pulse of flame. He knew this place, moaned quietly as he recognized it. Lovers' country: he had been here before, but only with women. And not all of them. Just the ones I loved... With Hutch, now. It's true! I love him I love him oh god I love...

Warm fingers closed and opened on him, squeezing gently, pumping. He arched up into them, crying out, wordlessly pleading for more. There was nothing in this enchanted dimension but himself, Hutch, and the sweet aching fire that filled and surrounded him; here no fear could come, no power of law or custom or years' worth of hammered-in rules. Here was all the joy his mind and body could hold, and here he was free. He grasped blindly for anything

solid in the lightning-shot waves, found Hutch's body and clung to it like a shipwrecked sailor to a floating timber. He felt broad ribs heaving under his arms, and knew he was utterly safe.

"Babe," Hutch whispered into his hair, "Is that good? Am I doing it right for you?"

...Right? "Yes! Yes!" Starsky gasped. --yes god yes so good don't stop let me come like this it's perfect like this--

The long-fingered hand clamped him, obligingly stroked upwards and released him and then repeated, sliding the skin heavily over the hot, pulsing core. Starsky thought he would burst, longed to. He thrust his pelvis upward, urgently, into the encircling hand.

"I love you," that beloved voice murmured, lips brushing his ear. "Love you...want to make it perfect for you..."

"Love you too," Starsky managed to say. God, yes. Love you...want it good for you, too...

But you're not getting any.

Guiltily, he dragged his mind up from the sea of liquid light and made his hands move. *How do I do this, Babe? How did you...?* He slid his hands down Hutch's back, exploring, searching, trying to think of what would feel good, trying to keep his mind clear, riding the surface of that invisible sea of fire. His fingers circled, interlaced, combed the subtle planes of that long back down to the waist. Hutch arched up across him, groaning quietly, fingers momentarily still. *He likes that!* Starsky smiled to himself. *Good. Do more. Take the chance...* He moved his hands down, closed on the small hard buttocks, squeezed, massaged. *Little-bitty buns... Is that good, Babe? Feels good here...*

Hutch gasped, writhed in that grip, grinding against his partner. Most of his weight came onto Starsky's belly, squeezing the wind out of him, stiff cock grinding into his thigh.

Starsky grunted at the pressure. *Easy, Babe! Clumsy. He's gone out of control. Who's driving?! Somebody has to...* "Easy, easy..." He reached up, slipped an arm around Hutch's neck and pulled him over on top. They rolled awkwardly for a moment, scrambling to match their bodies to a better fit. Starsky grabbed Hutch by the hips and almost dragged him into place, fitting muscle-planes together without intrusion of too many knobs and corners. The maneuvering felt silly, unwieldy, wonderful.

They paused for a moment, panting, and looked at each other. Starsky stared up, fascinated, into methane-flame blue eyes with pupils dilated to the size of finger-tips. In those obsidian mirrorlets he could see his own face, as if Hutch could see nothing else. "Ah, Hutch..." he whispered, awed. An impulse of frantic tenderness took him. He glided one hand up to Hutch's neck, pulled his head down, kissed him. *Moustache still tickles...lips so soft...satiny...* Intrigued, he probed gently with his tongue.

Hutch trembled heavily, burrowed his fingers into Starsky's hair, held his head immobilized and kissed back.

Starsky quivered, briefly resisted, then relaxed. The hot velvet tongue

brushed his own, rubbed softly, slid into his mouth. *Don't be scared! Starsky reminded himself, yielding to the tender invasion. Doesn't hurt yet. Doesn't hurt...feels good, actually... Well, I've been kissed before. It felt eerie, fascinating: hot wet velvet rubbing the insides of his cheeks, proving the little ridges in the roof of his mouth, striking deep sparks. The fierce hypersensitivity blazed up from his cock through his belly, nipples, throat, up to his mouth, making a wide-open channel of pleasure, spreading echoes of that touch through his whole body. Starsky groaned under it, melting, wanting, sinking back into welcoming flames. A random thought blossomed: Hey, he's inside me! ...Not that way, but... Could even that feel good? Like this?*

And then the probing tongue withdrew. Pressure reversed, pulling at him, sucking hungrily. Starsky gave a muffled yelp as he felt his own tongue drawn out of his mouth, past soft lips and a hint of teeth, into dark heat and rhythmic pressure, sweet hunger tugging at him.

All he could think was how that fierce hot sucking would feel elsewhere.

His body went out of control then, bucking, thrashing, thrusting blindly at the solid rippling flesh in his arms. Fragmentary visions blasted his clamped-shut eyes, sharp images no longer terrifying but promising release, showing him what he wanted.

--yes god yes Hutch yes please yes fuck me or suck me or something anything oh please yes please don't leave me like this finish me off--

But the intolerable sweet hot pressure would neither let him finish nor let him go. Desperate, he tore his mouth free, hearing an incoherent cry break from him at the loss of contact. He writhed in Hutch's grip, hips still thrusting wildly, gasped a quick lungful of cool air. He felt, more than heard, Hutch groaning rhythmically against his neck. The lean body on top of him began to thrust slowly, long cock grinding against his thigh and belly. The blazing tide had taken Hutch, too.

"Hutch, please!" Starsky begged, his voice unrecognizable in his own ears. "Do it! Finish-- Hutch, make me come, let me-- let me... Aaaaah! Do something! Do something!" He pounded his fist frantically on Hutch's back.

"Yes...yessss..." breathed raggedly into his hair. "Won't hurt you..." Long hands stroked rapidly as running water over his body, searching for the key that would release him, only fanning the flames. Starsky arched up like a drawn bow, helpless, wailing, consciousness spinning rudderless in a sea of sweet fire.

--migod can't stand it this is like torture I'm going to explode or die or burst at the seams do something please Hutch please--

He struggled madly, trying anything. His thighs spread open and Hutch almost fell between them, long legs tangling in his, slender cock rubbing against his like duellists' swords clashing. Starsky felt the shock-sparks blaze through him and almost screamed at the feel of it. "Yes! Yes! That's it! Please--" He remembered that Hutch was too far gone to understand. He wrapped his legs around Hutch's, clamping the narrow hips in his spread hands to keep him from sliding away.

"Like...this?" Hutch panted, leaning into him.

Again the long cock whipsawed across his, like a bow across violin strings, making every nerve sound. Starsky couldn't control his voice enough to answer; he thrust back, upward, stroking against Hutch with all of his body, making him feel it for himself and know what it was like.

Hutch gave a soft, delirious cry, pressed his whole length down on Starsky and caught the gasping mouth with his own, sealing them together in a long tight circuit of flame.

...Yes...

For a timeless instant they paused there, feeling the utter perfection, poised for the last wave. Then Starsky groaned and thrust, pleading, hands pulling urgently. Hutch drew a long sobbing breath and began to move, slide, pump his whole body back and forth against Starsky, grinding their cocks together from root to tip, holding his mouth pinned with a darting tongue. His hands burrowed under Starsky's back, holding him locked in place. Starsky wriggled, struggling feebly for a moment, then let go, gave himself up to it.

...ohgod so good so slow I think I'm going to die of this I don't care...

His body rocked in the mutual rhythm, out of control, matching Hutch's strokes with his slamming heartbeat falling into cadence. Lightning raked through his blood, nerves, rampaged up his spine and exploded in his skull, blazing endlessly, shattering thought to a mosaic of light. His mind flickered like a candle in a high wind.

--love you love you Hutch so good hot stell sheathed in satin stroking melting me down like iron in the crucible all glowing bright flesh and blood can't stand this don't want it to stop only go on forever and ever eternity like this god like this please Babe forever--

The slow grinding never changed rhythm, drove them slowly, steadily, up the bright wave to the peak, nerves threads of white fire, flesh incandescent, surging together, together endlessly. Starsky felt the hot pressure rising, soaring, and he knew he could no more prevent this than he could hold back the sea. Hutch arched upward slowly, mouth reluctantly pulling away, as his back tightened. Starsky vaguely felt his head rolling, thrashing from side to side, soft wounded cries slipping from him as the fluid heat rose like lava in the throat of an erupting volcano.

--Coming-- he recognized, and then all thought burned away in the explosion. A string of white-hot pearls dragged through him, soundless shattering nova, somewhere an ecstatic cry and fluid heat bathing his belly.

Then another thrust, and another, a second jolt of liquid fire drenching him and a hot solid body coming down into his slackening arms, broad chest on his and soft lips with an edge of tickly fur pressing his cheek. The bright universe released them to drift down like snowflakes in a windless, dark blue evening sky.

...Hutch...I love...us together...

Last fragments of consciousness falling into sweet darkness. Together. At the finish, together.

* * *

Awareness returned slowly, floating through measureless time. Hearing cleared first. Starsky noticed distant music, quiet as the surge of his own blood.

*You fill up my senses, like a night in the forest,
Like the mountains in springtime, like a walk in the rain,
Like a storm in the desert, like a sleepy blue ocean.
You fill up my senses. Come fill me again.*

...Oh yes. Hutch...yes... He stretched, utterly contented, and feeling sharpened. He noted without surprise the brittle flakes drying on his belly, the long legs entangling his knees, the limp heavy body lying warm against his own. Hutch. Here, now. Always. Exultant, he slipped one arm around his partner's back. So we're lovers now... There are other names for it. ...I don't care. Make love to me like that, and I don't care what anyone calls it!

He raised his head a little, looked down at himself, studied his sleeping cock lying fat and contented across his thigh. How did you do all that? he marvelled. Well, you had some help...

Under his arm, Hutch quivered. Flinched. A second time, and then again. It took a few seconds for Starsky to understand; then he shook himself fully awake and rolled toward his partner. "Hutch?" He gently took hold of Hutch's jaw and tilted his face up to the light. Saw the tight-squeezed eyes and cheeks tracked with fresh tears. "Hey, Babe? What's wrong?" What on Earth could be wrong after all that?

Hutch reluctantly pulled his eyes open, tried to control the sobs without much success. He looked lost and terrified, much younger, utterly defenseless, as if the firestorm they'd survived had burned away all his internal strength. "I'm s-scared," he whispered, shaking.

That was the last thing Starsky had expected. Astonished, all he could think to do was pull the ends of the rumpled quilt up over both of them and wrap Hutch in his arms, stroking gently. Hutch gripped the edge of the quilt and tugged it up to his eyes, like a frightened child hiding from monsters. Starsky hugged reassuringly, feeling the long body shake in his arms. "Whatcha 'fraid of, partner? I'm here. I'll make it go away."

Hutch looked up at him, eyes wide. "Starsk, we-- That was..." He gulped and tried again. "I didn't know it'd be like that. I lost-- Couldn't hold-- It felt so good...it drowned me!"

"Yeah," Starsky acknowledged, remembering. *I thought I was the only one with any right to panic...* "But we survived. We're here, now. See?"

"Changed! All changed. I'm so scared..." Hutch hid his face against Starsky's shoulder and wrapped shivering arms around him. "I didn't know it could be like that, Starsk. So- so goddam intense..."

"Neither of us expected that, Babe," Starsky soothed, rocking him gently. "We were...like I said, both virgins to this. We didn't know what was gonna happen, just that we wanted to try it. So we tried it, and it was better than we ever dreamed."

"Why?" Hutch groaned. "Why?"

"'Cause we're in love, is why. Okay. So?" Starsky shrugged.

Hutch took a deep breath and visibly struggled to calm himself. "So what does it mean that it was so good, that we're that much in love? I've never had it better in my whole life, Starsk! You tell me what that means."

"Uh..." Starsky chewed that over, trying to make sense of it. Two possibilities sprang to mind, and he didn't like either of them. "Hutch, isn't it a little late for either of us to worry about Being Queer?"

Hutch blinked up at him, a stunned look spreading over his face. "You know," he murmured, "It was easier to call myself that when I hated it, when I thought I'd lost everything, thought you'd never come back."

"Uhuh." Starsky felt his teeth grinding again, itching to clamp on a certain throat. The last piece of the puzzle fell into place, and the finished picture made him seethe with fury. *Choirboy. The pain-is-virtue trip. Who sold you on that, Hutch?* "Babe, is your old man still alive?"

"No," Hutch gulped, completely bewildered. "Why?"

"Lucky for him," Starsky growled. "If he was still walkin' around, I'd make a point of beating the shit out of him, personally. An' then I'd bust him for Child Abuse."

"Wha...?"

"You said it yourself! That son of a bitch made you scared, guilty, ashamed of wanting anything, enjoying anything. Thanks to him, you're scared of being happy! That's what it is with you, what it's always been. I've always wondered, and now I know. Oh, is that old bastard lucky he's safely dead!"

"You think...that's it?" Hutch sat up, eyes wide with wonder now, forgotten tears drying on his cheeks. "That's all it is?"

"Why else're you so damn suspicious of love, scared of being happy?"

"Uhm..." Hutch frowned, thinking. "Well, Vanessa didn't help..."

"I'd like to kick her butt, too."

"And I haven't exactly been lucky in love since..."

"Maybe you got in the habit of pickin' your ladies for the trouble they'd give you, prove you were right the first time."

"Jesus." Hutch pulled away, rubbing his forehead. "My partner, the psychiatrist!"

"Nah. Headshrinkers are mostly overpriced windbags. I'm just street-smart." Starsky hugged him closer. "An' I know you pretty well."

"Yeah." Hutch sighed, and let himself be pulled back against Starsky's warm woolly chest. Idly, he ran his fingers through the dark curls. "I guess it makes sense..."

Starsky felt his intuition take one of those wild leaps, brilliant hunches, that so often paid off. "Put it to the test, partner. Close your eyes and think hard. Imagine, real hard. What would your poppa do if he could see you right now?"

Hutch flinched, shuddered heavily. "He'd kill me," he whispered. "He'd beat my back raw, right down to the bones."

Starsky tightened his hold. "And whatta you think I'd be doin' meanwhile? Just sittin' here wringin' my hands?" --*Threw his buddy to safety and played human shield in the doorway... Do you think I can't do that much, or more?!* "Before he could lay a hand on you, I'd blast his fuckin' brains all over the goddamned wall!"

Hutch stared at him, shivered again, then steadied. He turned his head and solemnly kissed Starsky's cheek. "You really would, wouldn't you? You've already done that, dozens of times over, against worse thugs than my father ever was."

"Worse?" Starsky grumbled, still angry. "Tell me, did your old man ever pick on somebody his own size, or was he a coward too?"

"God...damn!" Hutch whispered, awed, as if watching the universe reassemble itself. He suddenly wrapped his arms around Starsky and squeezed hard, hard enough to make him grunt. "Oh Babe, I just wish you'd been there when I was a little kid, growing up alone and scared...or all those years when I was trying to live on that mistake... My god, the years I've wasted!"

"So think of the years we've got ahead." Starsky wriggled an arm free, tangled it in Hutch's soft gold hair, and kissed him. Lightly at first, then deeper, slowly and thoroughly.

Hutch groaned softly and ran his hands up and down Starsky's sides.

They stayed like that for long moments, enjoying the closeness, gentleness, warmth and relief. Neither of them was surprised that the pleasure stayed at a low, easy level; their bodies were still sluggish and wrung out, would be for hours.

Fatigue eventually pulled them away. Hutch snuggled back down on Starsky's chest and pulled the quilt close around both of them. The radio was playing some quiet instrumental, and the sound of rain had slackened a little.

A last thought, chill and worrisome, nagged at Starsky. He tried to push it away, but it kept coming back to nibble at the edges of his contentment. Ah, get it over with. He sighed. "Hutch, before I came up here, were you...were you gonna...do somethin' stupid?"

Hutch stirred uneasily. "What do you mean?" he mumbled, evasive.

"Like...blow yourself away?"

Hutch winced.

Bullseye. God damn! "You were?!"

"Not here," Hutch admitted, voice barely audible. "In Oregon. Nothing obvious, like blowing my brains out..."

It was Starsky's turn to flinch. The vivid image darted into his mind, and he kicked it out again, shuddering.

"I was just going to be...careless...on the job. Easy enough. They'd put it down to not knowing the territory. Killed in the line of duty. Nobody would ever know. 'Died of a Broken Heart' is so corny..."

"I'd know!" Starsky grabbed Hutch, rolled him over, pinned him. He rained fast, hard, desperate kisses all over Hutch's captive face, throat, ears,

gasping outraged words between attacks. "Don't you -- ever -- ever! -- even think of -- doing anything -- so goddam -- stupid! You belong to me! Don't you -- dare -- ever --"

"Starsk-- uhmf! Starsk, it's over!" Hutch managed to shake his head free. "Good god, there's no need for it now, not ever. I've got you."

"Damn right." Mollified, Starsky let go and snuggled back under the quilt with him. "Nobody and nothin' is ever gonna get you away from me, ever. Y'hear?"

"I so pledge," Hutch agreed solemnly.

"Okay." Starsky cuddled against Hutch's smooth shoulder, reassured.

"Still raining," Hutch commented.

"Umhmmmm..." Starsky nuzzled his hair, marvelling at it's fineness. "A real cloudburst."

"Bet it's started some lovely mudslides up in the hills.

"Bet it's flooded half the streets in L.A."

"Bet Venice is living up to its name right now."

"Bet the canal's overflowed, and we're marooned up here." Starsky nuzzled a velvety earlobe. "Got any food in the house?"

"Just some canned stuff, but it'll do for emergency rations." Hutch smiled wickedly. "I'll bet your car's floated into the canal by now."

Starsky gave him a pained look. "No way. It's too heavy. ...But it's probably awash by now. Be days before I can drive it."

"Same with my car, then." Hutch grinned. "You can bet the movers won't come today. Probably not tomorrow, either. We could be marooned up here for days."

"Days and days, on a desert island with you." Starsky grinned from ear to ear, and kissed him again.

"Mmm...and you are so a good kisser."

"Toldja."

"Starsk, there are going to be problems. There's a lot we have to deal with, think about. The job, where we're going to live, the--"

Starsky silenced him with another kiss, and took his time coming up. "I didn't expect it to be simple or easy, Hutch, but we've got a long time to think about it."

"Days and days up here..."

"More than that. Years." Starsky ran one fingertip down the length of Hutch's profile. "I think it'll be okay, long as we stay together."

"We'll be together." Hutch stated it as a fact, as certain as death, taxes, and the law of gravity. His eyes drifted closed.

Starsky leaned back and grinned up at the ceiling, listening to the rain.

END

The Beginning of "We"

Susan Wyllie

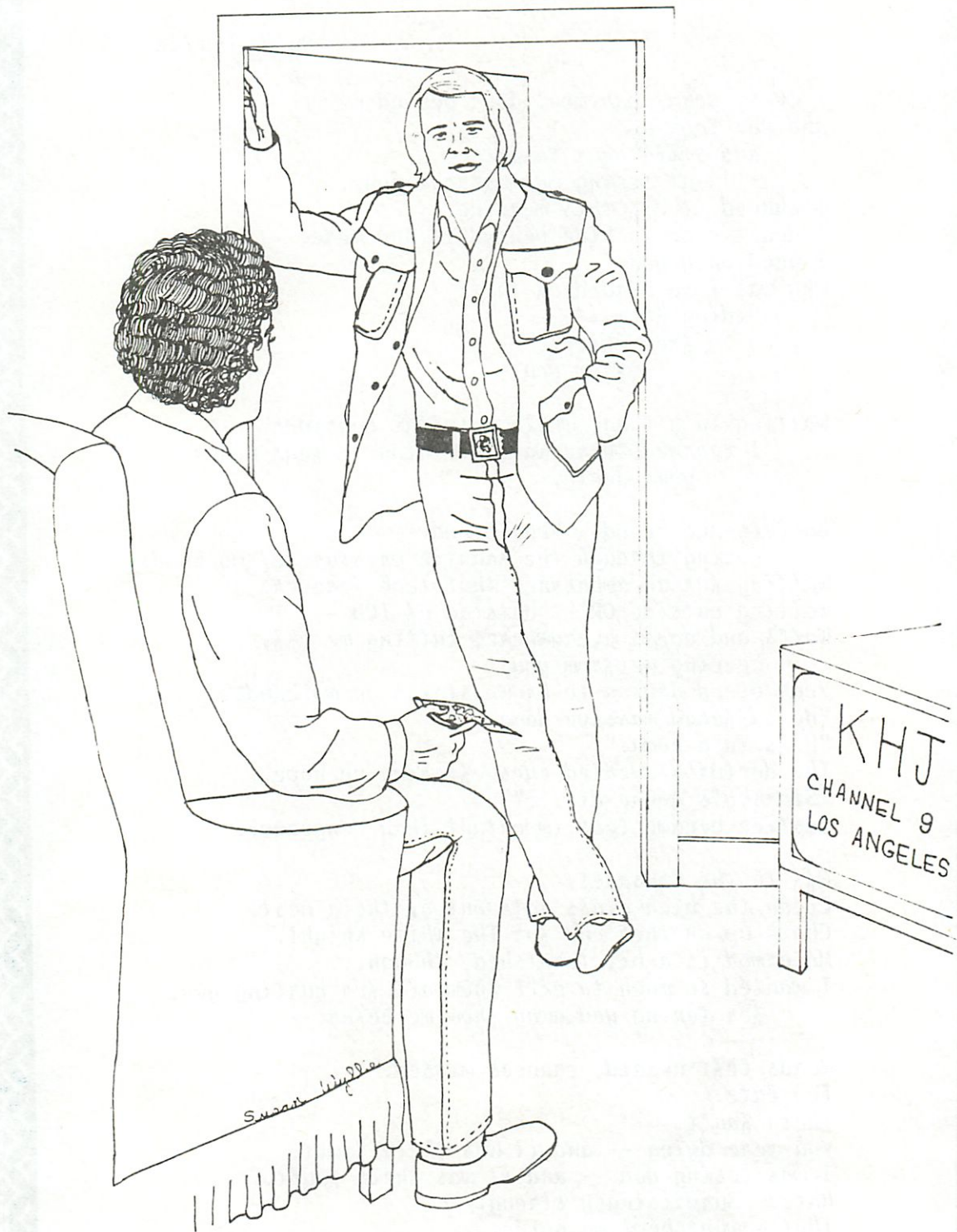
I close your apartment door behind me
and you look up
 and smile your surprise
 at seeing my mustache gone.
I shaved it off this morning.
I don't need to hide behind it any more.
I need only you.
Why was I so afraid of that?
 Hiding from it,
 from myself,
 from you.

Waiting in a long, white hospital corridor
I learned there was something to fear more:
 your death.

Bullets and blood. Your blood --
 oozing through the frantic pressure of my hands.
Waiting for an ambulance that took forever.
Waiting outside OR -- outside of ICU --
Walls and doors everywhere, cutting me off,
 keeping me from you.
Your blood drying to brown stains on my hands.
"He suffered massive damage."
"He's in a coma."
The doctor's averted eyes offering no hope.
"Starsky's gonna die..."
Justice became less important than vengeance.

Off to the Crusades.
Clean the high-class rats out of their nest.
Chalk up another one for The White Knight.
My armor is a bit tarnished, though...
I wanted so much to kill them all for hurting you,
 for taking you away from me before--

Words left unsaid, chances missed.
Too late.
Their fault.
You were dying -- and it was their fault.
I was losing you -- and it was their fault.
Hate. Surprisingly strong.
That's what kept me going;
 get them all.



...For you, babe...
not for justice,
not to enforce the law,
for you. Only for you.

Step by step. Up the chain of command, until--
"...if you can't afford an attorney..."

Really funny.

Gunther could afford the entire Bar Association.

Old man? Ha!

Old rat, feeding on the flesh of innocents.

No sympathy from me.

Remorse? No. No guilt-trips this time.

I'd do it all again for you.

Ideals don't make life worth living:
you do.

Shockingly simple. So obvious even I can see it.
You are all that matters.

I'm sorry for some things...

All the wasted time and stupid pretenses.

All the easy, willing girls I took to bed
when it was you I really wanted.

Using them to take your place.

Cruel. Heartless -- and futile.

All they did was fill your space.

No more.

You live --

and we have another chance.

I won't miss this one.

We're alone now. Barriers gone.

"I love you, David."

Your hand is trembling

as you put down a slice of pizza.

"Yeah, I know. I love you, too."

Words spoken at last.

This is the beginning of "we".

We need only each other.

A hard lesson, well learned,

and never to be forgotten.

Your blue eyes are alight with love

as I bend to capture your mouth with mine.

I've opened and closed a lot of doors in my life.

I'm glad the final door led me to you.

Lie back
and let me show you
that the best part of a journey
is coming home.



Susan Wyllie

You fade from me.

Even as I hold you in my arms
And feel your life-force spin away,
You call to me.

Even as your heart lies still
And I can reach you only in my mind,
You reach for me.

The tears burn on my cheeks, but I can see
Your hand above me
Shimmering,
Pleading,
Longing.

Afraid?

No.

Always knew
It would be this way.

What could hold me to the Earth
When my reason for living has left?

The Magnum feels so heavy and insistent in my hand...

Dying?

No.

Just another phase
Of life I'm entering.

But--

I only want to enter it with you...
How can I be sure I'll find you?

Then I see you smile at me.

Even as I let it go
And feel my life wheel down,
I smile back, knowing joy
As my spirit joins,
Twines with yours.

We melt into the velvet forever,
Never to be alone.
Together always...

Peace...

The curtain parts.
The dream releases me...

And I find you cuddled in my arms, sound asleep,
Alive and well.

I bury my face in your curls and kiss you,
Whispering prayers of gratitude forever.

-- Sue-Anne Hartwick

Fountain of Sorrow



(Adapted from a story idea by Billie Fowler)

by Eileen Roy

"You gonna talk to me?" Starsky asked, pacing the bedroom. Blue jeans embraced him in his world of sun; the denim jacket caressed him like a lover. Hutch leaned back against the head of Starsky's brass bed, metal rails molding his bones. His headache started behind one eye and arched backward, a dull-black viper, gnawing. The sunlight lanced him like a jeweler's tool.

"No," Hutch said, not caring if Starsky heard him.

"Talk," Starsky said, louder. "As in communicate? As in Kira, for instance? As in explaining how the hell you happened to be screwing a girl I thought I was in love with?"

Kira. Bitch. Taking Hutch home one night, Starsky the next. Playing with them. Pretending to understand-- Hutch looked away. Starsky's apartment, in cream and warm brown, pottery and wood. Haven. Sanctuary. Not for him. He tightened his fingers on the brass.

"As in why you've been walking into walls ever since I got out of the hospital? Talk to me, dammit!"

No. Too many revelations there. Hutch closed his mind against them.

"Hutchinson, I'm talking to you!" Starsky leaned over the bed, hands on either side, pupils dilated, thin ring of blue blazing at him. Barely seen through closed lashes.

"Go to hell," Hutch said clearly. The brief moments of friendship, shared laughter, me-and-thee-against-- It had evaporated in him, morning dew on the face of the desert sun. His life stretched arid, sear and unforgiving. He had no moisture now to share.

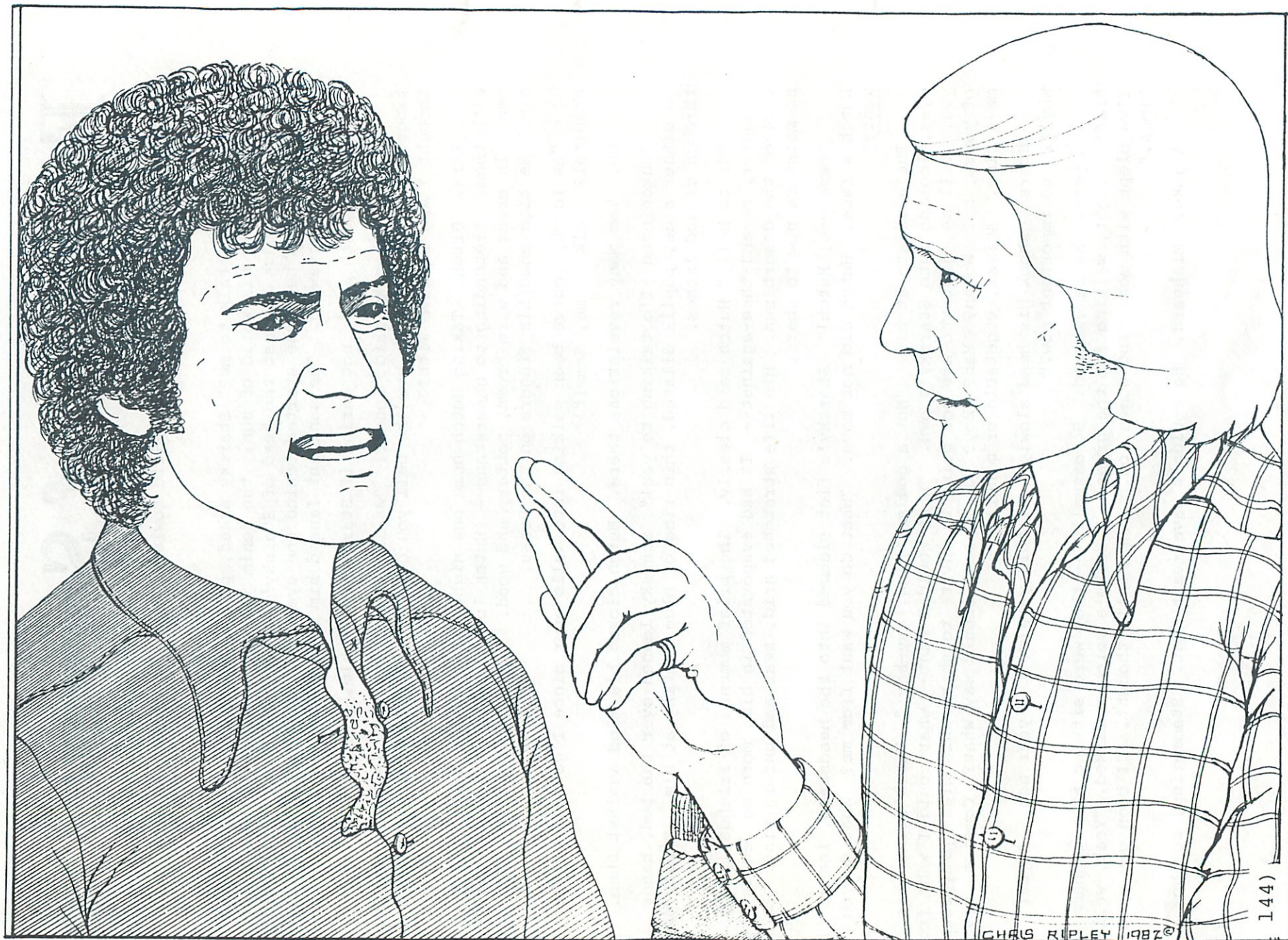
"Damn you, Hutch!" Starsky's fist slammed into the headstand, inches from Hutch's face. Hutch did not move. "What do you want from me? What do you want?"

The acid ate at him. "Not a goddam thing, gay-boy." Hutch opened his eyes, looking into Starsky's own. "What would I want-- what could I want from you? Tell me, just who are you going to invite to share this brass playground of yours, hm? Woman? Man? Boy? Or maybe I should say what? Come on, give me a clue. Animal, vegetable or mineral?"

Starsky shook his head slowly. "I told ya almost a year ago. A year. Why'zit so important now?"

A year. He remembered. So casually -- they were sitting at a goddam traffic light, waiting for the green! Starsky's voice remarked, "Yeah, well, I've slept with men. And women too." A moment's thought. "I been gay sometimes."

A joke. Misheard. He couldn't have meant that. Stammering, somehow



Hutch had asked, "But you never made a pass at me...?"

Starsky smiled at him. "What? And ruin a perfectly good partnership?" And the light changed, the subject dropped like a leper's stone, and the knell sounded then for the first time. Alone and drowning somewhere, part of him died to the sound of laughter.

"--I swear, ever since Vanessa--"

"You leave her out of it!" Hutch flared. Bitch, bitch, woman-bitch, tearing at his soul with red-painted fingernails even after she was dead. Sprawled in an untidy tangle of long-cold limbs, dyed-silk dress stained with urine and feces, blood clotting her perfect mouth-- In his dreams she walked, and laughed. The second knell.

"You know the funny thing?" Starsky said softly. "I wasn't even gay when I met you. When I saw you at the Academy, this six-foot-one, blond, blue-eyed Viking shining like the Star of Araby itself. After that I knew. I was scared of wrecking it with Super-Swede, so I started cruisin' instead. It was okay, it was all right, even if there never was an' never would be another golden boy..." He turned away. "An' then we were partners, and friends, and I stopped being gay. Nobody else measured up, and I wouldn't risk what I had. Not for anything else. Not for anybody else. 'Cause we were partners."

Hutch said the word, voice flat in a quiet room. "Were."

Starsky looked around. "Is that the way it is?"

Hutch's headache pounded at him. "Yeah. That's the way it is," he mimicked savagely. Bile spat from his mouth. His desolation crested, a black wave, spilling over to destroy everything he touched. He couldn't see anymore. He went on, throwing his life away with both hands. "You couldn't keep me if you chained me down! You-- I'm getting out. Out! This stinking, slimy, rat-crawling business--" His voice rose and fell...like the lawyers' voices flowing smoothly, like the clods of dirt spinning into a grave on a mild grey Minnesota morning.

Goddamn him, he never even said he was sorry...

Third knell. Last.

"--I am getting out and I am getting free. Free from you, free from this farce of a life, free--" His breath caught. He could not go on.

"Free for what?" Starsky asked coldly. He glanced down at Hutch's arm where the veins showed blue. "The garbage pit?"

Hutch closed his eyes, briefly. He could remember the needle, sweet black sleep. Sleep. "Maybe."

Starsky stared at him. Hutch could see his anger flare, burning inside him, a flaming idol.

"Like. Hell." Hands in his pockets, Starsky drifted to stand at the head of the bed. Hutch didn't try to keep him in sight. "You are mine, Kenneth Linden Hutchinson. I don't let go of what's mine."

Hutch put his head back to laugh.

Metal closed around his wrists with the kiss of steel.

He jerked his wrists down, sitting up fast. The handcuffs clattered on brass rails, holding him back. The edges bit into his flesh. He couldn't move.

"What the fuck--"

"You're mine, Hutch," Starsky said again. He slid his left hand down Hutch's shirt, over exposed skin. A button flicked open. Another. Hutch could feel his heart answer to that possession. The shirt fell open over his arms.

"Starsk!" He tried to swing his legs around, for escape or to fight. The handcuffs dragged him down and Starsky fell over his legs, keeping him down with a wrestling trick Hutch had taught him.

"No," Hutch said fiercely, bucking, flinging his body away from the hold. "No!"

"Yes." Starsky's breath whispered against his groin, an intimate touch. He undid Hutch's belt, pulling trousers and ski-shorts down. "Yes." His breath hissed warm, an inch from Hutch's cock. Hutch tried to cover himself. He could not.

"You're mine, Hutch." Starsky turned his head, brushing his cheek deliberately against Hutch's cock. His curls, wirey-soft, stroked from tip to base. Again. "I can make you move. I can make you hold still. I can make ya cry like a friggin' baby, and I can make you beg me on your knees." He laid his palm against the side of Hutch's face. "When you smile, that belongs to me. And this--" His tongue flicked, rimming the opening to Hutch's cock. Hutch gasped. Cold curled inside his belly.

"--this belongs to me, too."

"No..."

Then the laughing mouth took him.

He hadn't been sucked like this since Vanessa-- He batted the thought away, all thought away. Fight it. Somehow, fight. He groaned softly, sweat beading his skin. Starsky's mouth on him, lips engulfing him, they swallowed him, soul-high. Betrayed him to pleasure. No! He bucked, struggling, and Starsky laughed.

Starsky took him almost to the peak and eased him down again. He quickened the rhythm to make Hutch stiff again, bursting, but at the brink he slowed down, brought Hutch back. And he repeated it over and over until Hutch thought he would lose his mind if he couldn't finish soon. Harsh moans slipped from his throat. His head rolled on the brass rail. He couldn't take it any longer, and Starsky made it go on and on.

"Starsk, for god's sake--" he gasped finally. Life or death, either one, but end it--

Yes!

He fell forever, the release as much a punishment as reward. Blackness came, and he welcomed it.

The petit-mort left him slowly, reluctantly. He could feel his nakedness on the bed. He shivered, opening his eyes.

"What are you so afraid of?" Starsky asked, looking down at him. "Me?"

Hutch's eyes focussed on Starsky. He snarled and tried to lunge. The cuffs held him securely. "I'm going to kill you!"

"You're not going to kill me, you're not going to kill anyone," Starsky said impatiently. "I'm going to love you, and you're not going to die from it."

"You're going to fuck me, you mean!"

Starsky looked at him strangely. "You want me to?"

Hutch kicked at him, bare foot skidding off Starsky's thigh. "Pervert! Cocksucker! You couldn't fuck a real man if you had directions! You're a punk; you come from slime and you spit it out!"

Face gone white, Starsky drew his hand back. Hutch stared, defiant, at Starsky, at the raised hand. "Hutch," Starsky said, expression set like iron, "I swear, you make me madder than anyone else on Earth." He slid down the bed, caught hold of Hutch's feet and flipped him onto his stomach. Hutch yelled in surprise and anger. Arms crossed in front of him, Starsky holding onto his ankle. He had no leverage to turn.

"Let go of me!" He kicked air. "I'll scream."

"Scream your head off; the people next door just moved," Starsky said tightly. He stroked down Hutch's back, curve of ass, fingers intimate in-between. Hutch squirmed and struggled. He could hear Starsky move.

"You can't get away," Starsky said, voice moving away and back. Hutch heard a whicker-whirr. He felt leather, cool and rough, circling his tethered ankle. Tugging that foot to the bedpost. Starsky's belt. Fabric moved by his right leg; another whirr-whisper. His own belt. He struggled. He couldn't move. The belt drew him tight. Holding him open. Spreadeagled. He could not move.

"You're mine," Starsky said softly. Anger glittered diamond-bright in his words, sheathed his flesh in steel, burned molten inside him. Hutch could feel the heat. A muscular arm pulled him up by the waist, pushed a pillow underneath his hips. Fingers tweaked his nipples, casually. Hutch's breathing was loud.

"I will make you beg for me..."

Hutch turned his head to one side. He tried to spit out something, a curse. He couldn't find his voice.

Starsky stood in front of him, pulling off jeans and shorts. His cock rode high, purple at the tip. Hutch wet his lips. Leather held him. Leather and steel.

"Starsk," he began. A warning? A plea?

Starsky leaned over him, fingers sliding into his hair in a controlled grip, just hard enough for pain. A male mouth was on his, tongue thrusting deep inside. Then gone.

"Not even a good kisser, huh?"

A drawer grated open, behind him. He heard a jar unscrew. Starsky's weight leaned over him, furnace-hot on his back. Teeth bit at the nape of his neck, and a hand worked on his asshole, coating him with a gob of something greasy. One finger slipped inside, rubbing. He clenched down, and Starsky slapped his buttock. Hutch jumped. A second finger invaded him. The lubricant

was slimy and felt hot. Starsky's cock touched him. He couldn't move.

"You're mine," Starsky repeated, very very gently. "You can't run. You can't drive me away. Not this time. Not now." He pushed in, a little. Hutch's sphincter seized tight, trying to keep him out. Useless. Starsky pushed again, and it hurt.

"Fuck..." Hutch tried to say. Starsky's hands were on him. Expert hands. Taking him slowly, so slowly. Another push. Inch by inch, he was being split. Hands stroking his cock, massaging his balls. Pulses of pain, burning, helpless anger...the arousal, the belts...the belt-- He wouldn't cry out, he wouldn't, he never had and he never would--

"Fuck...you," he managed, voice strained and hoarse. He dragged in breath, clutching at the brass rungs with bloody hands. Starsky moved in him slowly, matching each stroke with a caress. Nails skimming his stomach, hands tracing nerve endings, lips marking his skin. Pulling a response. Owning him. Starsky filled him. He almost moaned his rage. Pushed back at him. Again.

"Fuck you fuck you fuck you..." Red blossom flaring in him. Controlled, ridden like a thing, a life-size rubber doll. He couldn't stop it. He was helpless in enormous hands, burning, pain raping him, purging him, washing him clean. "...fuck you fuck you fuck me..."

He cried out and came, rising in wave upon wave, red-misted breakers rolling down on him, carrying him to darkness.

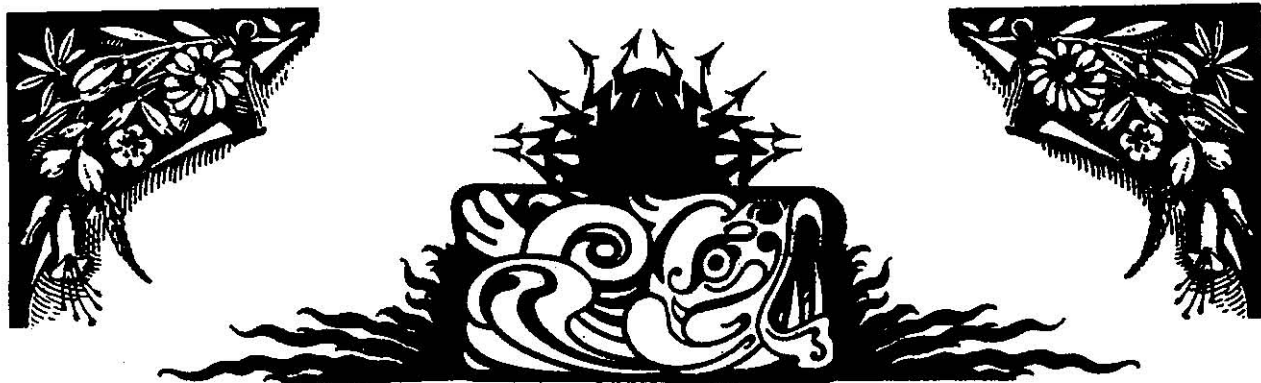
Later, he lay still. Passive under Starsky's touch. Neither spoke. The other man's movements were heavy now, anger drained away. The leather belts fell to the floor. Keys clicked in steel. Starsky held his bleeding wrists, kissing them softly, daubing them with a cloth, bandaging with handkerchiefs. A mute, wordless mime of sorrow and comfort. Hutch felt a distant pity. Starsky laid himself down beside Hutch, lashes making weary shadows. Hutch watched him. Empty. Washed clean. He couldn't touch anything beyond his fingertips.

Am I good now? he thought dreamily. *Can I stop hurting?* *Am I good now?*

He sighed, a feather-weight. Head almost on Starsky's shoulder. He was free, for the moment. And if the pain came back, the black beast gnawing, forcing him to vomit up his own existence--

Starsky still had the belts, and the cuffs.

He sighed again, hand open to Starsky, and let his eyes close.





The Wish

-- Sue-Anne Hartwick

For moments frozen in time
Let me lie beside you, love.
Let me fold you to my heart,
Feel your pulsing strength echoing mine,
Forget that bitter blackness would have silenced it forever.

Wasted years of wanting,
Nearly ended forever by a shattering stream of lead.
Hours of lonely praying,
Willing to sell my soul just to see your smile again.

Your life was your gift to me.
Let my life be my gift to you.

Our love should join our lives
As hot irons fused together:
Exchange our life-streams joyfully,
Sealing pledges with our mingled seed.

Love melding two hearts and souls forever,
Leaving death behind...
For moments frozen in time.





Don't DO That!

Leslie Fish

Aw Babe, don't go and look at me like that,
Not with that thoughtful, hot gleam in your eyes.
It makes my bones melt and my pants get tight,
And the car automatically turns toward home
And the nice soft bed and the silky sheets...
Helluva distraction while I'm driving!

Babe, don't run your hands down your thighs like that.
It makes me think of how those long hands feel
Stroking on me, gentle and smooth and slow...
And I stop paying attention to the road.
Lucky I don't wrap around a telephone pole.
And then you go and criticize my driving!

Dammit, Babe, don't touch my neck like that.
Those nuzzling fingers burrowing in my hair
Send scarlet lightning charging down my spine,
Converging like a cyclone in my crotch,
Forcing my head back and my thighs apart...
Now how am I supposed to drive like this?!

Awright! That does it! Into the nearest alley,
Down past where any windows overlook.
Set the brakes and get these pants unzipped...
What am I doing? What the hell do you think?!
You started this; you finish it. Right now!
Just get your head down here and... Ohhh, like that!

I bet you planned this, you-- you Golden Tease!

Art:

Cover: Marie Aranas
 pg. 2: Freda Hyatt
 pg. 5: " "
 pg. 9: Franny
 Moore-Kyle
 pg. 10: Susan
 Wyllie
 pg. 12: C. Casey
 pg. 15: " "
 pg. 18: Susan
 pg. 20: Wyllie
 pg. 26: " "
 pg. 28: " "
 pg. 34: " "
 pg. 44: Freda Hyatt
 pg. 51: " "
 pg. 59: " "
 pg. 76: " "
 pg. 82: TJ Burnside
 pg. 87: " "
 pg. 90: " "
 pg. 94: Marie Aranas
 pg. 100: " "
 pg. 116: " "
 pg. 128: " "
 pg. 138: Susan
 pg. 141: Wyllie
 pg. 144: Chris
 Ripley
 Back Cover:
 Ruth Kurz

